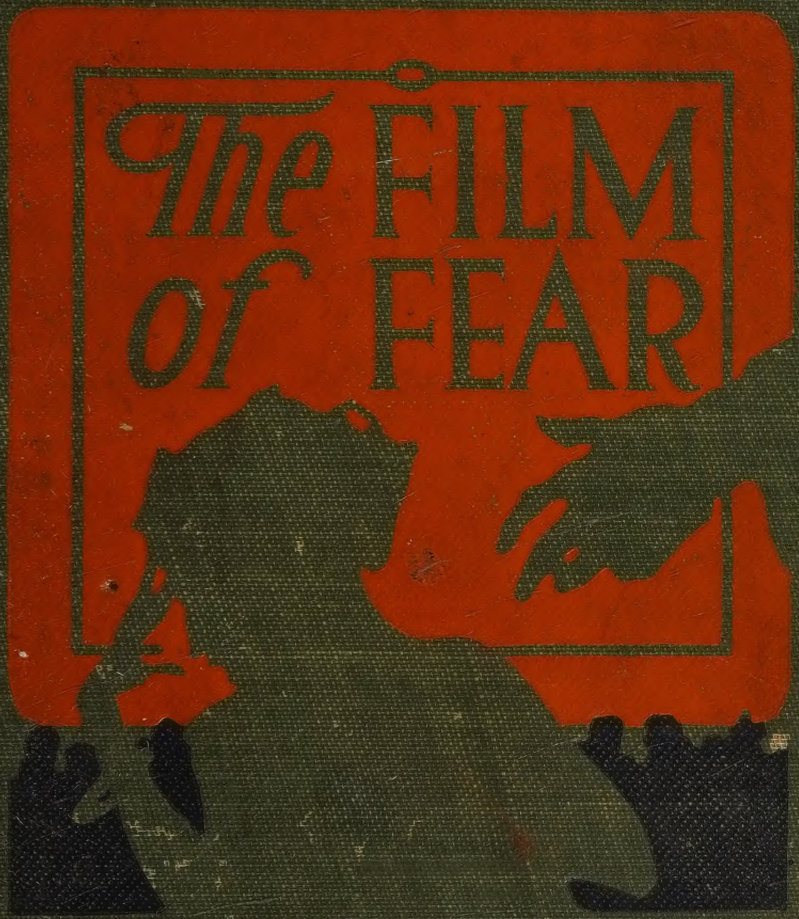
The FILM of FEAR



ARNOLD FREDERICKS

THE FILM OF FEAR

He was watching, not only Ruth, but those about her

THE FILM OF FEAR

BY

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THE IVORY SNUFF BOX, ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

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THE FILM OF FEAR

PART I

CHAPTER I

RUTH MORTON finished her cup of coffee, brushed a microscopic crumb from her embroidered silk kimono, pushed back her loosely arranged brown hair, and resumed the task of opening her mail.

It was in truth a task, and one that consumed an inordinate amount of her valuable time. And her time was extremely valuable. Computed upon the basis of her weekly salary of one thousand dollars, it figured out just $142.85 per day, or very nearly $6 per hour, or 10 cents per minute, for each minute and hour of the twenty-four. As a motion picture star, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she was paid a slightly larger salary than had been,

until recently, received by the President of the United States.

The opening of the huge batch of letters that greeted her daily across her dainty breakfast table was very much of a duty. It was not that she felt any keen interest in the numberless notes from admirers, both male and female, from Portland, Me., to Los Angeles, Cal., to say nothing of South Bend, Opeloosa and Kicking Horse between. These might readily have been consigned to the depths of the wastebasket unopened, unread. But there was always the chance that, intermingled with this mass of adulation, there might be a real letter, from a real friend, or a business communication of importance from some picture company possibly, prepared to offer her two thousand dollars per week, instead of one thousand, at the expiration of her present contract. So the mail had to be carefully opened, at least, even if the bulk of it was tossed aside unread.

Her mother usually assisted her in this daily task, but to-day Mrs. Morton, oppressed by a slight attack of indigestion, slept late, and Ruth proceeded with the operation alone.

She was a singularly attractive girl, combining a

wholesome and quite unassumed innocence with a certain measure of sophistication, gained by daily contact with the free and easy life of the studios. Her brown eyes were large and wondering, as though she still found it difficult to realize that within four years she had stepped from comparative poverty to the possession of an income which a duke or a prince might readily have envied. Her features, pleasing, regular, somewhat large, gave to her that particular type of beauty which lends itself best to the eccentricities of the camera. Her figure, graceful, well modeled, with the soft roundness of youth, enabled her to wear with becoming grace almost any costume, from the simple frock of the school girl to the costly gowns of the woman of fashion. Add to this a keen intelligence and a delightful vivacity of manner, and the reason for Ruth Morton's popularity among motion picture "fans" from coast to coast was at once apparent.

She sat in the handsomely appointed dining-room of the apartment on Fifty-seventh Street which she and her mother had occupied for the past two years. The room, paneled in dull ivory, provided a perfect setting for the girl's unusual beauty. In her kimono of Nile green and gold, she presented a figure of

such compelling charm that Nora, her maid, as she removed the empty coffee-cup, sighed to herself, if not with envy, at least with regret, that the good God had not made *her* along lines that would insure an income of over fifty thousand dollars a year.

Ruth sliced open half a dozen more letters with her ivory paper knife and prepared to drop them into the waste basket. One was from a manufacturer of cold cream, soliciting a testimonial. Two others were from ungrammatical school girls, asking her how they should proceed, in order to become motion picture stars. Another was an advertisement of a new automobile. The fifth requested an autographed picture of herself. She swept the five over the edge of the table with a sigh of relief. How stupid of all these people, she thought, to take up their time, and her own, so uselessly.

The sixth letter, from its external appearance, might readily have been of no greater interest than the other five, and yet, something intangible about it caused her to pause for a moment before inserting the point of the knife beneath the flap of the envelope. It was a large envelope, square, formal-looking. The address upon it was typewritten.

Unlike the majority of the other letters, forwarded from the studio, it bore the street and number of the apartment house in which she lived. The envelope was postmarked New York, and was sealed with a splotch of black sealing wax, which, however, contained the imprint of no monogram or seal, but was crossed both vertically and horizontally by a series of fine parallel lines, dividing its surface into minute squares.

Ruth observed these several peculiarities of the letter she was about to open, with growing interest. The usual run of her correspondence was so dull and uninteresting that anything out of the ordinary was apt to attract her attention. Slipping the ivory blade of the paper knife quickly beneath the flap of the envelope, she cut it open.

The letter within, written on the same heavy paper as that composing the envelope, contained but three typewritten lines. It was not these, however, that instantly attracted Ruth's attention, but the signature appended to them. This signature did not consist of a name, but of an astonishing seal, imprinted upon a bit of the same black sealing wax with which the envelope had been fastened. And the device, as Ruth bent over it to make out its clear-

cut but rather fine lines, filled her with a sudden and overwhelming dismay.

It was a grinning death's head, about half an inch in width, with eye-sockets staring vacantly, and grisly mouth gaping in a wide and horrible smile, made the more horrible by the two rows of protruding teeth. The girl almost dropped the letter, as full realization of the significance of the design swept over her.

Hastily she recovered herself, and with trembling fingers raised the letter from her lap. The three typewritten lines upon the sheet were, if anything, more horrifying than the device beneath them. "Your beauty has made you rich and famous," the letter read. "Without it you could do nothing. Within thirty days it shall be destroyed, and you will be hideous."

For a long time Ruth sat gazing at the words before her. In spite of their ghastly significance she could with difficulty bring herself to believe that she had an enemy in the world sufficiently ruthless, sufficiently envious of her beauty and her success, to be capable of either threatening her in this brutal way, or of carrying such a threat into execution. So far as she knew, there was not a single person of all her

acquaintance who wished her ill. Her own nature was too sweet, too sympathetic, too free from malice and bitterness, to conceive for a moment that the very charms which had brought her fame, success, might also be the means of bringing her envy and hatred in like proportion. She cast about in her mind for some possible, some reasonable explanation of the matter, but try as she would, she was unable to think of anyone with whom she had ever come in contact, capable of threatening her in this terrible way. She had about decided that the whole thing must be some stupidly conceived practical joke, when she saw her mother cross the hall and come into the room.

Mrs. Harriet Morton was a woman of fifty, handsome and youthful in spite of her gray hair, her years. That she had once been extremely good-looking could have been told at a glance; anyone seeing mother and daughter together experienced no difficulty in determining the source of Ruth Morton's charms.

"Well, dear," said the older woman, with a pleasant smile. "Haven't you finished your letters yet?" She glanced toward the clock on the mantel. "You'll have to leave for the studio in half an hour."

Ruth nodded, gazing at her mother rather uneasily.

"You'll have to open the rest of them, mother," she said, indicating the pile of letters. "I—I'm tired."

Mrs. Morton came up to her daughter and passed her hand over the girl's glossy hair.

"What's wrong, Ruth? You look as though something had frightened you." Then her eyes fell upon the letter lying in the girl's lap, and she paused suddenly.

Ruth handed her mother the sheet of paper.

"I—I just got this," she said, simply.

Mrs. Morton took the letter quickly from her daughter's hand and proceeded to read it. A look of apprehension crept into her eyes, but she did her best to appear unconcerned.

"Some crank," she said, after she had mastered the sudden fear that swept over her. "I shouldn't pay any attention to it, if I were you, my dear. There are a lot of people in the world that have nothing better to do, than play silly jokes like that."

"Then you don't think it amounts to anything?" Ruth asked, somewhat relieved.

"Certainly not. Just a stupid plan to frighten

you. Pay no attention to it. No"—she folded the letter as the girl put out her hand—"I'll take charge of this. Now you'd better hurry and get ready. The car will be waiting for you at nine, and Mr. Edwards expects to start that new picture to-day, doesn't he?"

"Yes." The girl rose. "It's a beautiful part. I'm the daughter of an old music teacher, who dies in Brooklyn, and leaves me in poverty. And later on, it turns out he was the heir to the throne of Moravia, and I'm a princess. Lots of adventures, and spies, and all that. Ralph Turner is the lover. He's awfully good-looking, don't you think?"

Mrs. Morton assented in rather a preoccupied way, as her daughter left the room. She was still thinking of the brutal threat which the girl had just received, and of the possible dangers to which she might as a result be exposed. Mrs. Morton by no means felt the matter to be a joke, in spite of the assurances she had given Ruth. The tone of the letter, the evident care which had been taken to prevent the identity of the writer from becoming known, filled her with the gravest alarm.

As she sat pondering the matter, Nora came into the room, with Ruth's dust coat and parasol in her

hands. Mrs. Morton beckoned to the girl, then spoke to her in a low voice.

"Nora," she said, "Miss Ruth received a letter this morning, from somebody who is envious of her beauty and success. I pretended to make light of the matter, but there may be something back of it. I want you to watch her carefully while you are away from the house. Be on your guard every moment of the time. Don't let anyone come near her. They might try to throw acid, or something of the sort. I shan't feel safe until she is home again."

The maid's face lit up with a significant smile. From her manner it was clear that she fairly worshiped her young mistress.

"I'll not let anyone do her any harm, Mrs. Morton," she said, earnestly. "You may be sure of that."

"And don't let her know," Mrs. Morton added hastily, in a low voice, as she saw Ruth come to the door, "that I am at all worried. She must not have a threat like that on her mind."

The maid nodded, then turned toward the door where Ruth stood.

"Well, mother, good-by," the latter exclaimed with a laugh. "You can open all the rest of the

letters, and if you come across any more like that last one, please keep them. I think I'll begin a collection."

Mrs. Morton forced herself to join in the girl's laughter.

"There won't be any more, dear," she said, kissing the girl fondly. "Don't bother your head about such things. They're not worth it. And come home as soon as you get through."

"All right, mother. We're going to the theater to-night, aren't we? Don't forget to get the tickets." With a smile she left the room, and a few moments later Mrs. Morton heard the rumble of the descending elevator.

She sat in silence for a long time, thinking, a great fear clutching at her heart. Her life, she reflected, had held, until recently, but little of happiness. The long, weary days of poverty, when her husband, incapacitated by a paralytic stroke, had seen his savings slowly dwindle away; the death of her son, and then that of Mr. Morton himself passed before her mental vision. Only Ruth had been left to her, and in the girl's happiness and success lay Mrs. Morton's whole life and being. Now, that things had at last taken a turn, and the future

seemed clear and assured ahead of her, was some dreadful tragedy to change all her joy to sorrow? She turned to the pile of still unopened letters with a sigh, afraid, almost to proceed with the task of reading them. Yet, an hour later, when they had all been disposed of without further threats against Ruth having been discovered, she breathed more easily. Perhaps, after all, the horrible letter was merely a silly joke. She took it out and examined it again with the greatest care, but no clue to the identity of the writer rewarded her scrutiny. The message remained clear, terrible, full of sinister meaning. *"Within thirty days it shall be destroyed, and you will be hideous!"* The grinning death's head seal stared up at her, fascinatingly horrible. Mrs. Morton quickly placed the letter in her bosom.

Rising, she left the room, and proceeded to that occupied by Ruth. It pleased her, notwithstanding the servants, to take care of it herself. Mrs. Morton was passionately devoted to her beautiful daughter. In her, the sun rose and set.

She glanced about the daintily furnished room with a smile. The appointments were simple, almost girlish, in spite of their owner's large salary. Mrs. Morton began to set the room to rights.

She had finished making the bed, and had gone over to the dressing table to arrange the articles upon it, when a square of white upon the floor attracted her attention.

It lay upon the rug in front of the dressing table, and appeared to be a letter of some sort.

Supposing it to be something that the girl had dropped in the hurry of leaving, Mrs. Morton stooped and picked it up. Then a queer feeling of dismay came over her. The large square white envelope, the typewritten address, bore a singular and disquieting resemblance to the one in which the threatening letter had been received so short a time before.

With trembling hands, Mrs. Morton tore the envelope open and removed the folded sheet of paper within. When her eyes fell upon the contents of the latter, she shuddered, and stood white with fear.

There was a message in typewritten characters upon the sheet, and Mrs. Morton read it with a groan of despair.

"Only twenty-nine days more!" the message said. "We shall not fail." Below the words grinned the frightful death's head seal.

CHAPTER II

MRS. HARRIET MORTON was a courageous woman, but when she read the second threat against her daughter, she was filled with instant indignation and horror. The thing was so appallingly mysterious, so utterly without reasonable explanation.

Ruth had left the room but a few moments before. Certainly the letter was not upon the floor then. The maid, Nora, had gone with her. That removed her from any suspicion, even had such a thought been reasonable or possible, and Mrs. Morton felt it was not. The only other person in the apartment was Mary, their old cook, a negro from the south, who had been a faithful and patient member of the Morton household for over ten years. That she could have had a hand in placing this mysterious message in Ruth's bedroom seemed incredible, not to be entertained for a moment. And yet, there was the message, appallingly simple, direct,

threatening. *"Only twenty-nine days more!"* Mrs. Morton shuddered.

She glanced about the room. How had the letter come there? Certainly not by means of the door. Yet it seemed equally out of the question that it could have been brought in through one of the windows.

There were two in the room, one facing to the front, and opening upon a court, the other in the rear, overlooking the yards of the houses on the next street. She went to the front window, which was raised only a few inches, and gazed out

Below her stretched the wide court, flanked on one hand by the side of the apartment building, on the other by the blank wall of an adjoining house. The latter was some ten feet from where she stood, and *there were no windows in it!* She turned to the window at the other side of the room.

Here a fire escape led down to an alley at the rear of the building. Could it have been in this way that the letter had been delivered? The thing seemed impossible. Not only was the window closed, but she knew that the ladders did not reach all the way to the ground, the last section being pulled up, to be

dropped only in case of fire. With a mystified look she returned to the center of the room.

The letter grinned at her from the dresser, on which she had left it. Ruth must never hear of the matter, she knew. Taking it up, she placed it in the bosom of her dress along with the one which had arrived earlier in the day. Then she sat down to decide what she had best do next.

To trifle with so dangerous a situation was no longer to be thought of. One message, the first, might have been a foolish joke. The second proved that the danger threatening her daughter was real, imminent.

At first she thought of placing the matter in the hands of the postal authorities, but would they, she wondered, concern themselves with threats delivered in other ways than by mail? This second message had not come through any such channels. In desperation she put on her hat, placed the two letters in her handbag and set out to seek the advice of one of her oldest and best friends.

Her purpose took her to a private banking house in Broad Street, upon the wide entrance doors of which was inscribed the name John Stapleton & Co. She asked to see Mr. Stapleton.

John Stapleton was a man of wealth and influence in the financial world, and Mrs. Morton's husband had at one time been one of his most trusted employees. Now that Ruth had become to some extent a capitalist, it was to Mr. Stapleton that the care of her savings had been entrusted. Mrs. Morton felt the utmost confidence in both his sincerity and his judgment.

Mr. Stapleton received her almost at once, in his simply yet richly furnished private office, and rising from his huge flat-topped rosewood desk, welcomed her warmly, and asked what he could do for her.

Mrs. Morton felt confused. Her mission seemed, after all, a strange one with which to come to a leader of finance.

"I—I am in great trouble, Mr. Stapleton," she began.

"Yes?" He took her hand in his and led her to a chair. "Tell me all about it."

Mrs. Morton explained the circumstances surrounding the receiving of the two letters in detail, and then handed the documents to Mr. Stapleton.

"Do you think I had better place the matter in the hands of the postal authorities?" she said.

Mr. Stapleton examined the two letters carefully then he shook his head.

"No. At least not at present. It seems to me that your daughter may be in grave danger, and under those circumstances, I think your wisest course would be to employ a private detective, an investigator of matters of this character, not only to ferret out those who are responsible for these threats, but to take steps to protect your daughter from harm."

"You think, then, that she is really in danger?" Mrs. Morton gasped.

"I do not wish to alarm you, but I very much fear that she is."

"But I don't know any private detectives," Mrs. Morton began.

Stapleton looked up from the letter.

"When I spoke," he said, "I had a certain man in mind. He is not a detective, in the usual sense of the word. You can find plenty of those, of course, but, while they are useful enough in the detection of criminals of the ordinary sort, they would probably have very little success in an affair such as this. The man I had in mind is a brilliant criminal investigator, one whose services I have more than once been obliged to make use of in matters of a personal

nature. Some two years ago, for instance, my child was kidnapped, in Paris, and held for ransom. The entire police force of the French capital seemed powerless to discover his whereabouts. At last I called in Richard Duvall, and within a few days my boy was returned to me, and the criminals who had abducted him placed under arrest. It was a marvellous, a brilliant piece of work. I am not likely to forget very soon the mystery of the changing lights." He paused, and Mrs. Morton spoke up eagerly.

"Give me Mr. Duvall's address," she said, "and I will see him at once."

"That," Mr. Stapleton smiled, "is, of course, the great difficulty. Duvall, who is married, lives with his wife on their farm near Washington. They both have plenty of money, and he has practically retired from professional work."

"Then of what use is it to suggest his name?" asked Mrs. Morton, quickly.

"He had already retired," Stapleton rejoined, "at the time of my boy's kidnapping, but I prevailed on him to take up the case. His retirement merely means that he is not in the active practice of his profession. But exceptional cases, cases which by

reason of their novelty interest him, he may be persuaded to undertake. I fancy this matter of your daughter's would prove attractive to him. It is unusual—bizarre. I strongly advise you to see him."

"To do that, I must go to Washington?"

"Yes. I will give you a letter which will insure you an interview, and, I hope, enlist his services in your behalf." He pressed a button on his desk, summoning a stenographer. "I sincerely hope that you will be successful."

Mrs. Morton sat in silence while the letter of introduction to Richard Duvall was being written. Then she rose to go.

"I will leave for Washington this afternoon," she announced. "I feel that there is no time to waste."

"You are quite right. And be sure to tell Mr. Duvall that you are a close personal friend of mine, and that anything he can do for you I shall appreciate to the utmost."

Mrs. Morton went back to the apartment, and made her preparations to start. She determined to take a train leaving at half past three, and as Ruth would not return from the studio until later, she

called her up on the telephone, and told her of her sudden determination.

"It is a matter of business, dear," she explained. "I will be back to-morrow. Good-by." The girl's cheerful voice reassured her. At least nothing had happened up to now, to give cause for alarm.

It was only when Mrs. Morton was about to leave for the train that her nerves were once more subjected to a severe shock.

The telephone bell rang, and she went to answer it, thinking that Ruth might for some reason have called her up.

Over the wire came a thin, queer voice.

"Beauty is only skin deep," it said. "A breath may destroy it." After that, silence.

Mrs. Morton made a frantic effort to learn the number of the station from which she had been called, but without success. In a rather depressed state of mind, she made her way to the train.

It was half past eight at night when she arrived in Washington, and she at once called up Richard Duvall on the telephone.

To her disappointment, she learned that he was out, and was not expected back until late. There was nothing to do but wait until morning. She re-

tired to her room, full of hope that the following day would bring an end to her fears.

Immediately after breakfast she called again, and this time was more successful. Duvall himself answered the telephone.

"I am Mrs. Morton, from New York," she said, eagerly. "I would like to come out and see you."

"What do you wish to see me about?" the detective inquired.

"It is a personal matter. I will explain when I arrive. I prefer not to do so over the telephone. I have a letter to you from Mr. Stapleton."

"Mr. John Stapleton, the banker?"

"Yes."

"Come, then, by all means, at any hour that suits you. Mr. Stapleton is one of my best friends."

Mrs. Morton hung up the receiver, after assuring him that she would start at once. Then she went out and engaging an automobile, set out for Duvall's place.

CHAPTER III

RICHARD DUVALL and his wife, Grace, lingered rather later than usual over their breakfast that morning.

It was a warm and brilliant day in May, and the blossoming beauty of the spring filled them both with a delightful sense of well-being.

Duvall, however, seemed a trifle restless, and Grace observed it.

"What's the matter, Richard?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing." Her husband picked up the morning paper. "They are still looking for the woman in that Marsden case, I see," he remarked.

"Do you know, my dear," Grace said, "I sometimes think that you made a mistake in coming down here to the country to live. Your heart is really in New York, and every time there is a murder case, or a bank robbery, or a kidnapping up there, you are restless as a hen on a hot griddle until the mystery is solved. Why don't you take up your professional work again?"

Duvall laid down his paper and regarded his wife with a look of surprise.

"Because, Grace," he said, "you especially asked me, after that affair of the missing suffragette, to finally give up my detective work and content myself with a quiet existence here on the farm. You said, on account of the boy, that I ought not to take such risks."

"Well—suppose I did. You agreed with me, didn't you?"

"Yes—I guess so." Duvall once more picked up the newspaper. "But, naturally, I can't help feeling a certain interest in any striking and novel case that I may read about."

"And I haven't a doubt," laughed Grace, "that you wish that you were back in harness again a dozen times a day. Come now—'fess up. Don't you?"

"Sometimes," granted her husband, with a smile. "You know I loved my work. It always seemed to take me out of the dull routine of existence, and give me a new feeling of interest. I shouldn't mind if I had a novel and interesting case to work on right now."

"Would you take one, if it were offered to you," asked Grace quickly.

"No—I guess not. I haven't forgotten my promise."

"Well—I've decided to release you from that, Richard. I really think you need a little mental exercise and diversion. All play and no work, you know——" She began to arrange the dogwood blossoms she had gathered before breakfast, in a big vase on the table.

Duvall laughed.

"I'm getting along very well," he said. "Don't forget I'm expecting to have that corner lot planted in potatoes to-day." He rose, and coming over to his wife, playfully pinched her cheek. "What's the matter, dear?" he asked. "Are you pining for a little trip to New York yourself? We don't need a murder mystery to make that possible, you know."

Grace shook her head. As she did so, the telephone bell in the hall began to ring. "That may be your murder mystery now," she said, with a laugh.

"More likely the Clarks asking us over to dinner this evening," he returned, as he made his way into the hall.

Grace continued to arrange her flowers. Presently Duvall re-entered the room. There was a curious smile upon his face.

"Well," Grace remarked, glancing up. "Which was it? The murder case, or the Clarks?"

"Neither. A mysterious woman, this time, saying that she must see me at once. I told her to come on out."

"Ah! This *is* serious," his wife laughed. "A mysterious woman! I suppose I ought to be jealous. Didn't she say what she wanted with you?"

"No. But we'll know soon enough. She'll be here at half past nine. Suppose we go and take a look at those Airedale pups." Together they crossed the veranda and made their way toward the barn.

Richard Duvall had changed but little since the days when he had served on the staff of Monsieur Lefevre, the Prefect of Police of Paris, and had taken part in the stirring adventures of the Million Francs, the Ivory Snuff Box and the Changing Lights. The same delightful spirit of *camaraderie* existed between his wife, Grace, and himself, a spirit which had enabled them, together, to solve some of the most exciting mysteries in the annals of the French detective service. It had been nearly two years, now, since the affair of the Mysterious Goddess, the last case in which Duvall had been concerned, and he was beginning to feel that he would

welcome with outstretched arms a chance to make use once more of his exceptional talents as an investigator of crime. Hence he had received Mrs. Morton's telephone call with more than ordinary interest.

The latter had told him nothing of her reasons for interviewing him, contenting herself with the bare statement that she had a letter to him from Mr. Stapleton. This, however, had been enough to set Duvall's nerves to tingling and to cause him to conclude that the mysterious woman who desired to interview him in such a hurry came on no ordinary business. Hence he waited with some impatience for the arrival of half past nine.

A few moments after the half hour, a large automobile swept up the drive, and Duvall, with a nod to his wife, went back to the house to receive his guest. She was waiting in the library when he entered.

"I am Mrs. Morton, of New York," his caller began, handing him Mr. Stapleton's letter.

Duvall read it, but it told him little.

"Mr. Stapleton informs me," he said, looking at his visitor, "that you are in some difficulty or other, and asks that, if I can possibly do so, I try to help

you out of it. Did he not also say that I have for some time past given up the active practice of my profession?"

Mrs. Morton nodded, then bent eagerly forward.

"Yes, Mr. Duvall. He told me that. But he also said that, when you heard the circumstances, you might be persuaded to assist me. I am in very deep trouble, and I fear that there is not a moment to be lost."

"What is the nature of your difficulty, madam?" Duvall asked.

"It—it concerns my daughter. I am the mother of Ruth Morton." She made this announcement as though she fully expected Duvall to realize its significance at once, but the latter's face remained quite blank.

"Yes?" he replied, vaguely. "And who is Ruth Morton?"

Mrs. Morton looked at him in pained surprise. The thought that anyone could possibly be ignorant of her daughter's fame and success seemed unbelievable to her. Was not Ruth's name a household word among moving picture "fans" from coast to coast? "Why—Ruth Morton—the motion picture

star," she replied. "Surely you must have heard of her."

Duvall smiled, but shook his head.

"I never go to motion pictures," he said. "But that is of no importance. What has happened to your daughter?"

"Nothing. At least I hope not—yet. It is what *may* happen to her that frightens me so." She took the two threatening letters from her handbag and gave them to the detective. "These came yesterday," she said, simply.

Duvall took the letters, and proceeded to read them with the utmost care. When he looked up, his eyes were sparkling with interest.

"The first letter, I observe," he said, "was mailed night before last, at half-past six, at the general post office. How was the other letter delivered?"

"I do not know. I found it, yesterday forenoon, upon the floor in my daughter's bedroom, an hour or more after she had left the house. She has not seen it. I kept all news of it from her, as I did not wish her to be frightened."

"That was wise, of course," Duvall said. "But how could the letter possibly have been placed where

you found it, without your knowledge? Who, beside yourself, was in the apartment at the time?"

"No one, but an old negro cook, who has been with me for years. I am quite certain that she had nothing to do with it."

"And the maid of whom you speak?"

"She had left my daughter's room, and come into the dining room, where I was sitting, before Ruth left the bedroom. They went out together. The note could not have been in the bedroom then, or my daughter would certainly have seen it. The thing seems almost uncanny."

Duvall began to stroke his chin, a habit with him when he was more than usually perplexed. Presently he spoke.

"One thing I have learned, Mrs. Morton, after many years spent in detective work. There is no circumstance, however mystifying it may at first appear, which is not susceptible of some reasonable and often very commonplace explanation. You find this letter on the floor in your daughter's bedroom. It was placed there, either by someone within the apartment, or by someone from without. Now you tell me that it could not have been placed from within. Then I can only say that someone must

have entered the room, or at least managed to place the letter in the room, from outside."

"That may be true, Mr. Duvall," remarked Mrs. Morton, quietly, "but when you consider that our apartment is on the fourth floor, that one of the windows of the room was closed, and the other only open a few inches, and that the blank wall of the opposite house is at least ten feet away, I fail to see how what you suggest is possible."

Her words filled Duvall with surprise. If what his caller said was true, the case might have elements which would make it more than usually interesting.

"Has your daughter any enemy, who might envy her her success, and wish to deprive her of it?" he asked.

"None, that I know of. But since these two letters came, I feel convinced that someone, whom, I cannot imagine, *does* feel that way toward her, and that on account of it she is in the gravest danger. Don't you think so, Mr. Duvall?"

"I think it highly probable. And what, Mrs. Morton, would you like to have me do in the matter?"

"Why—come to New York, take up the case, and find out who these wretches are, so that they may be prevented from doing my daughter any harm.

There is no time to lose. They may carry out their threats at any moment. You will observe that in the first letter they said that her beauty would be destroyed *'within thirty days.'* One of those days has already passed. To-day is the second. At most, we have but twenty-eight days left in which to find out who is responsible for this outrage. Investigation may consume a great deal of time. I hope that you will consent to come to New York and take charge of the matter at once. I am returning this afternoon, as soon as I can get a train. Can you not return with me? As for the matter of expense, I place no limit upon it. There is nothing I would not sacrifice, to save my daughter from the fate they have threatened. Think what it would mean, Mr. Duvall. A young, beautiful, innocent girl, scarcely more than a child, to go through life with her beauty taken from her, made hideous by some fiendish device, blinded and scarred by acid, her features crushed—gashed by some sudden blow. Can you imagine anything more terrible?"

Duvall thought for moment of his own lovely child, now almost three years old, and shuddered. Bank burglaries, thefts of jewels, seemed relatively of small importance compared with such a situation

as this. His feelings of chivalry rose. He felt a strong desire to help this young girl.

"Here is her picture," Mrs. Morton continued, taking a photograph from her handbag and extending it to Duvall.

The latter gazed at the charming features of the young actress, and nodded.

"She is lovely—exquisite," he murmured. "I don't wonder you feel as you do. I did not intend to take up any detective work at this time, but I have decided to assist you in this matter in any way that I can."

"Oh—thank you, Mr. Duvall." There were tears in Mrs. Morton's anxious eyes. "I can never repay you for your kindness—never. But if you can save Ruth from these scoundrels, I will gladly spend——"

"Never mind about that, Mrs. Morton," Duvall observed, with a friendly smile. "It is scarcely a question of money with me. If I had not felt a keen interest in your daughter's welfare, I should not have agreed to take up the matter at all. As it is, you need not worry about the expense. I am going to take the case largely bceause it has interested me, and it will be a pleasure to work it out, not only on

your daughter's account, but on my own. You know, to me, such matters are of absorbing interest, like the solving of some complex and baffling puzzle."

"Then you will go back to New York with me this evening?"

"I can hardly do that, Mrs. Morton. But I can agree to call on you there to-morrow. It will take me some hours to arrange matters here so that I can leave. I do not think you need worry for a few days at least. If these people had meant to act at once they would not have named the period of thirty days in their threats."

"Very well." Mrs. Morton rose, and held out her hand. "I will expect you to-morrow. Will it be in the morning?"

"Very likely. In any event, I will first telephone to you." He entered the address in his note-book. "By the way, perhaps you had better let me keep that photograph."

"Certainly." Mrs. Morton handed it to him, and he thrust it into his pocket. "The letters you already have?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes. One thing. Do not tell your daughter that you have employed me in this case. It—it might alarm her."

"Certainly not. And that leads me to say that you, on your part, will of course observe the utmost secrecy. Even with Mrs. Duvall."

"That goes without saying, madam. My professional secrets I share with no one. Even between my wife and myself there is an unwritten law which is never broken. Unless we are working on a case together—unless she can be of service to me, she asks no questions. She would not speak to me, or even recognize me, were we to meet, while I am engaged in work of this sort. You need have no fear on that score."

"I am very glad to know that. Were these people to suspect that I have placed the matter in the hands of a detective, they would be instantly on their guard, and all means of tracing them might be lost."

"That is undoubtedly true, and for that reason, I may appear in other characters than my own, from time to time, disguised perhaps, in such a way that even you would not recognize me. Under those circumstances I will suggest a password—one that will not be known to anyone else. Should occasion arise

in which I desire to acquaint you with my identity, without making it known to others, I will merely repeat the words—twenty-eight days, or twenty-seven or six or five, as the case may be, on that particular day, and you will know that it is I, and act accordingly. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Duvall."

"Very well. Then we will leave further details until to-morrow." He shook hands with his caller, escorted her to her automobile, then returned to the library and began a careful study of the two notes which Mrs. Morton had left with him. Here Grace found him, half an hour later.

"Well," she said, coming up to him with a smile. "Shall I begin to pack our things?"

Duvall put his arm about her.

"Yes, dear," he said. "We'll leave on the sleeper to-night. You can get Mrs. Preston to come and take charge of the house while we are gone. It may be two weeks. That is, if you want to go along."

"Want to go along? Why, Richard, I'm just dying for a trip to New York. I haven't been there since before Christmas, as you know, and I've got to get a spring outfit. Of course I'm going." She went gayly toward the hall stairs.

"Then you must be ready right after lunch," he called after her.

"But why so soon, if we are taking the sleeper?"

"Because we are going up to town this afternoon and see a few moving pictures."

"Moving pictures?" Grace paused at the door, an expression of the utmost astonishment upon her face. "Why, Dick, you never go to moving pictures. You've always said they didn't interest you."

"We're going, just the same."

"What's come over you?" Grace asked.

"Nothing. I'm curious to see some of them, that's all. Never too old to learn, you know. If I am not mistaken, I saw a new feature film advertised in the newspaper this morning." He took a paper from the desk and glanced through it. "Here it is. Ruth Morton, in *The Miser's Daughter*. Have you seen it?"

"No. But I've seen Miss Morton often—in pictures, I mean. She's a lovely creature, and a splendid actress, too."

"Then this film ought to be a good one, don't you think?"

Grace burst into a rippling laugh.

"You're getting positively human, Richard," she

exclaimed. "Here I've been telling you for months past what a lot you've been missing, and you only made fun of me, and now you actually suggest going yourself. Was the lady who called interested in the motion picture business?"

Duvall laughed, but made no reply.

"What's the mystery?" Grace went on, with an amused smile. "You haven't told me, you know. Has she lost her jewels, or only her husband?"

Duvall raised his hand.

"No questions, my dear. This is a professional matter. But I don't mind telling you this much, if I ever become a motion picture 'fan,' you'll have her to thank for it."

"Really. Then I'm glad she came. I hate going alone. And it seems I shall also have to thank her for a trip to New York. She has my eternal gratitude. Now I'm going up to pack."

Duvall resumed his seat, and once more took up his examination of the letters Mrs. Morton had left with him, but they told him little. There were the usual individual peculiarities in the typewritten characters, but that was about all he could discover. The letter paper, while of excellent quality, was such as might be bought at any first-class stationery store.

The death's head seal, of course, was highly individual, but to trace anyone by means of it presented almost insuperable difficulties. To find the seal, one must of necessity first find its owner, and then the chase would be over. He replaced the letters in his pocket book, and went to his room to make ready for their journey.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. MORTON returned to New York that afternoon, greatly pleased with the results of her trip. That she had been able to enlist the services of Richard Duvall gave her a sense of security. She found Ruth at home, safe and well, with no further threats or warnings to disturb her peace of mind. The girl was absorbed in her new rôle. The picture promised to be the most successful of her career.

The following morning Mrs. Morton rose early, in order to go through the mail before Ruth had an opportunity to do so. The shock caused by the first threatening letter had passed from the girl's mind. The second she knew nothing of. Mrs. Morton was determined that if any more arrived, she should not see those either.

Trembling with eagerness she opened the pile of letters, but found nothing. With a sigh of relief she turned away. Perhaps, after all she had exaggerated the importance of the matter.

Half an hour later, while Ruth was eating her breakfast, a messenger boy arrived with a telegram, addressed to Miss Ruth Morton. The maid, seeing no reason to do otherwise, brought it to the girl as she sat at the table. Mrs. Morton, who had been at the rear of the apartment, hurried in as she heard the sound of the doorbell, but by the time she had reached the dining room, Ruth had already opened and read the message. She sat staring at a bit of yellow paper, her face pale and drawn.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Morton cried, hurrying to her side.

Ruth picked up the telegram and handed it to her mother.

"Another threat," she said, quietly. "These people, whoever they are, seem to be in deadly earnest."

Mrs. Morton took the telegram and hurriedly read it.

"Even the beauty of the rose," the message said, "'cannot endure for twenty-seven days." There was no signature to the telegram.

A look of the deepest apprehension crept into Mrs. Morton's eyes, but she turned away, so that Ruth might not realize her fears.

"Pay no attention to the matter, Ruth," she said,

in tones suddenly grown a trifle unsteady. "It is certainly nothing more than a stupid joke."

"Well, mother, of course you may be right, but for my part, I have a feeling that it isn't a joke at all, but a real and very terrible threat. What is to prevent these people, whoever they are, from attacking me—sending me some infernal machine in the disguise of a box or package, which, as soon as I open it, might burn or blind or otherwise disfigure me so that my life would be ruined?" She rose and glanced at herself in the mirror which hung over the mantel. Already there were deep circles of anxiety beneath her eyes, while the lines of her face, usually sweet and placid, were now those of an anxious and frightened woman. The first threat had upset her far more than her mother had realized. The one just received had intensified the effect a hundredfold.

"But you mustn't open any packages, my child. Be very careful about that. And Robert must not stop the car, under any circumstances, in going to or from the studio. There, at least, I believe you are quite safe. I will have a talk with Mr. Edwards to-day, and explain matters to him. And here you cannot possibly be in any danger. Meanwhile, in

spite of what you say, I still beg you not to let this matter prey upon your mind. I cannot, will not, take it seriously." Poor Mrs. Morton, herself thoroughly frightened, strove with all her might to convince Ruth that she had nothing to fear. She knew the girl's intense, high-strung nature, and feared that constant worry, ceaseless anxiety, might readily so work upon her as to reduce her to a nervous wreck long before the expiration of the thirty days named in the first threatening letter. She found herself wishing devoutly that Duvall would appear.

As she finished speaking there came a ring at the doorbell, and Nora started to answer it. Mrs. Morton stopped her.

"Nora," she said. "Listen to me. You are not, under any circumstances, to admit anyone—no matter who it is—until I have first seen and talked with them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I understand," replied the girl, as she went out into the hall.

A moment later Mrs. Morton, hearing a man's voice, hurried after her. Nora, with the door but slightly open, was speaking with a rough-looking fellow, a workman, apparently, who stood in the

hallway outside. He was a man of thirty-five, with a reddish moustache, wearing working clothes and a cap. This he removed, as Mrs. Morton came to the door.

"Is this Mrs. Morton's apartment?" he asked.

"Yes. What do you want?" Mrs. Morton's voice and manner were far from encouraging.

"There seems to be a leak in the plumbing somewhere on this floor," the man went on. "There's trouble with the ceilings in the apartment below. The superintendent wants me to go over the connections and see that everything is all right." He lifted a canvas bag containing his tools from the floor, and made as though to enter. Mrs. Morton, however, did not open the door any wider.

"You can't come in now," she said. "Come back later—in an hour. My daughter is not dressed yet." She seemed ready to close the door entirely, but the man again spoke.

"Can't afford to wait, ma'am," he said, with a significant smile. "I got every apartment in this building to go over before the end of the month, and there are *only twenty-seven days left.*" He emphasized his concluding words, at the same time looking Mrs. Morton squarely in the eye.

The words, the man's look, brought sudden recognition. Mrs. Morton drew open the door.

"Very well," she said. "Come in." She realized that the supposed workman was no other than Duvall.

The latter went quietly toward the kitchen at the rear of the apartment, and occupied himself by examining the connections of the sink. He seemed to work slowly, unconcernedly, whistling softly to himself as he moved about. His eyes, however, were very bright and keen, and no detail of the room, the negro cook who occupied it, or the buildings in the rear, escaped his attention.

Mrs. Morton came back presently and addressed him.

"My daughter has gone, now," she said. "You may look over the plumbing in the bathroom whenever you are ready."

With a nod Duvall picked up his tools and followed her to the front of the apartment. As they left the kitchen, Mrs. Morton closed the door leading from it to the hall.

"I want you to stay here for the next hour, Sarah," she said, as she left the kitchen. "If anyone

rings, I will answer the bell." A moment later she and Duvall were in the library.

The latter pretended to be busy inspecting the connections of the hot water radiator.

"Have you received any more threats?" he asked, in a low voice, without turning his head.

Mrs. Morton took the telegram that Ruth had received a short time before, and placed it in his hand.

"This came half an hour ago," she said, without further comment.

Duvall read it, then thrust it into his pocket.

"Did your daughter see it?" he asked.

"Yes. It had been delivered to her before I could prevent it."

"That is too bad. Was she much upset?"

"Yes. The thing is beginning to get on her nerves."

Duvall rose, and placed his tools in the kit.

"Please take me to your daughter's bedroom," he said. Mrs. Morton led the way.

The room was a fairly large one, situated in an ell at the rear of the building. Of its two windows, one, as has already been pointed out, overlooked the court between the apartment building and the house next door. The other faced toward the rear.

Duvall placed his kit of tools upon the floor, and began an examination of the room. After a quick glance about, he turned to Mrs. Morton.

"Where was the letter found—the one that did not come through the mails?"

"Here." Mrs. Morton indicated a spot on the floor near the small enameled dressing table that stood against the east wall of the room. Its position was midway between the two windows. It was clear that whoever had entered the room might have done so through either of the windows; at least, the position in which the dressing table stood afforded no indication as to which one it might have been.

"Which of the two windows was open, when you found the letter?" Duvall asked.

Mrs. Morton indicated the one facing the court.

"This one," she said. "Not wide open. Perhaps six or eight inches."

"The other was not fastened, I suppose?"

"No. Ruth always keeps it raised during the night, but usually closes it while dressing."

Duvall went to the window, and opened it. It was well balanced and moved easily.

"Anyone coming up by way of the fire escape could, of course, have raised the window from the

outside, and closed it again after leaving the room," he said, more to himself than to Mrs. Morton. Then he got out on the fire escape and made a careful examination of its surface.

"When was this ironwork painted?" he asked Mrs. Morton, through the window.

"About ten days ago."

"H—m." Duvall examined the newly painted iron surface with rather a blank expression. That anyone had walked upon it since it had received its newly applied coat was, he felt, out of the question. The paint was so new, so shiny, so yielding in its fresh glossiness that, even treading as lightly as he could, the marks of his shoes were plainly visible. He leaned over and pressed the palm of his hand upon the grated iron floor. The pressure of his hand was sufficient to dull the freshly painted surface. It seemed impossible that anyone, even in bare or stockinged feet, could have been upon the fire escape, without having left tell-tale marks upon it. He re-entered the room, and turned his attention to the other window.

Here the opportunities for entrance seemed even more unfavorable. The window was situated on the fourth floor. There was still another floor above,

with a window similarly located. Anyone might, of course, have been lowered from this window above, to the sill of the one at which he now stood, and entered the room in that way. He examined with care the white woodwork of the window sill, also freshly painted. It showed no marks. This, of course, was not conclusive. He determined to investigate the occupants of the apartment on the top floor.

The wall of the brownstone dwelling house next door, which formed the east side of the narrow court, was of brick, covered with ivy. There were no windows in it whatever. Apparently it had once adjoined the wall of a similar house, where the apartment building now stood, and when the second house had been torn down to make way for the new building, the partition wall had remained as originally built, without windows.

Duvall examined this house next door with a great deal of interest. It was four stories high, with an attic, and rose to almost the same height as the fifth floor of the apartment house, owing, no doubt, to its ceilings being somewhat higher. In the sloping roof of the attic were three small dormer windows, facing the court, but the nearest one was

perhaps twenty feet from the window of Ruth's room, in a horizontal direction, and some eight or ten feet above it. There was no way in which anyone could have passed from the attic window to that of Ruth's room, even supposing such a person to be an expert climber. Anyone lowered from this window by means of a rope would merely have found himself hanging against a bare brick wall, twenty feet from the window of the girl's room. Duvall, accompanied by Mrs. Morton, made his way back to the library.

"You feel quite certain about the cook?" he asked.

"Sarah?" Mrs. Morton smiled. "What do *you* think? You've seen her."

"She certainly appears to be above suspicion," Duvall replied. "But one can never be sure. Suppose you send her out on some errand. I should like to search her room."

Mrs. Morton left him for a few moments, and presently the old colored woman passed down the hall and left the apartment. Then Duvall, accompanied by Mrs. Morton, made a thorough examination of the woman's room.

His search disclosed nothing of interest, nor was a similar search of the room of Nora, the maid,

productive of anything that could in any way connect her with the mysterious warnings. There remained only the occupants of the fifth floor apartment. Duvall requested Mrs. Morton to summon the janitor of the building, and explain to him, in a guarded way, that he wished to ask him certain questions.

The janitor proved to be a good-natured fellow, who seemed extremely anxious to please Mrs. Morton in every possible way. In answer to a question from the latter, he said that the apartment on the top floor was vacant, and had been vacant for nearly two months.

The family that had occupied it, he explained, had moved away, and had requested the management of the building to sublet it. This they had not yet succeeded in doing.

"May I go up and look it over?" Duvall asked.

"Sure you may," the janitor replied, and he and Duvall went to the elevator, leaving Mrs. Morton waiting in the library.

The apartment on the top floor had been newly done over, and smelt of fresh varnish and paint. The shiny floors had scarcely been walked upon, since they had been refinished. The air was close and

warm, by reason of the tightly closed windows. Duvall proceeded at once to the room directly over Ruth's bedroom.

To his disappointment the two windows were not only closed and fastened, but so tightly stuck on account of the fresh paint that it required the combined efforts of the janitor and himself to open them. That they had been opened, since the painting had been done, some ten days before, was clearly out of the question. Duvall made up his mind at once that however the person who had placed the mysterious message in Ruth's room had effected his or her entrance, it had not been by way of the apartment on the top floor.

Somewhat disappointed, he went to the floor below, and thanking the janitor for his kindness, rejoined Mrs. Morton.

"What have you discovered, Mr. Duvall?" the latter asked, eagerly.

"Nothing, so far. I confess the thing is somewhat of a puzzle.

"Someone *must* have been in Ruth's room."

"Not necessarily."

"But—why not?"

"You will remember that you found the letter on

the floor. That would seem to me to indicate rather the opposite. If anyone had actually been *in* the room, they would have been far more apt to place the message on the dressing table. That it was found upon the floor indicates to my mind that it was in some way inserted—thrown, perhaps—through the window from without." He took the letter in question from his pocket, and sitting down, gazed intently at the surface of the envelope. Presently he passed it over to Mrs. Morton. "What do you make of that?" he said, indicating with his finger a curious row of indentations, extending in a semi-circular line about midway of one of the longer edges of the envelope.

The marks were very faint, but by turning the letter about in the light, Mrs. Morton at last managed to make them out. What they were, how they had been placed there Duvall could not say. Yet their presence indicated something of value, of that he felt sure.

"I don't understand them at all," Mrs. Morton replied, returning the letter to him. "It looks as though someone had held the letter in a—a pair of pincers."

The suggestion conveyed by her words interested

Duvall greatly. The same thought had been forming in his own mind.

He rose to his feet, his eyes shining with interest. Why could not such a pair of pincers or forceps have been attached to a long pole, such as a fishing rod, and the letter in this way pushed through the window and released by pulling on a cord attached to one of the forceps' handles? The thing was perfectly practical, except for the fact that there seemed no place from which such a pole or rod might have been extended. He gazed out of the library window, across the court to the row of dormer windows in the house opposite. The distance from the nearest of them, to Ruth's window was, as he had before observed, at least twenty feet horizontally, or some twenty-three feet on the diagonal. Then there was the distance from the window to the dressing table, at least eight feet more, to be added, making necessary a rod over thirty feet long. And he saw at a glance that even could a rod of this length be secured and handled, the angle made by a line from the dormer window through Ruth's window was such that the end of the rod or pole would strike the floor only a few feet beyond the windowsill, and in no possible way could its further end be elevated

sufficiently to deposit the letter in front of the dressing table. The thing was manifestly out of the question, even had the window of the girl's room been *wide open.* And Mrs. Morton had assured him with the greatest positiveness that it had been open, at the time the letter was found, *but a few inches.* He returned the letters to his pocket and rose.

"The thing is astonishing—remarkable," he said to Mrs. Morton, who was regarding him intently. "I confess that so far I am quite in the dark. I feel sure that whoever entered the room, or left the message, must have done so by means of the fire-escape, and yet, how was it possible, without marks having been left upon the paint? I think I shall make another and even more careful examination, in the hope that some slight clues may have escaped me." He once more made his way toward the girl's room, followed by Mrs. Morton.

The room was precisely as they had left it. The window facing to the rear was wide open, Duvall having omitted to close it after his examination of the fire escape. The window fronting on the court was raised perhaps six inches. And yet, to the utter amazement of them both, there lay on the floor of

the room, near its center, a square white envelope, addressed in typewritting to Ruth Morton.

Duvall sprang forward and seized it with an exclamation of astonishment. It bore the same seal, in the same black wax, and upon it was the same semi-circular row of indentations. He tore the letter open. Its typewritten message was brief but significant. "Only twenty-seven days more," it read. The grinning death's head seal seemed to Duvall's astonished eyes even more terrifying than before.

With a bound he reached the rear window, and swung himself upon the fire escape. There was no one in sight. The gray surface of the ironwork showed not the slightest scratch, save those made by his own heels earlier in the day. The steps of the ladder leading up to the next floor were glistening, immaculate. Those of the one to the floor below were equally so. He re-entered the room, and going to the opposite window, threw it wide open. The three dormer windows of the adjoining house were gray, dusty, as though they had not been opened for years. He turned to his companion with a look of amazement.

"In all my experience, Mrs. Morton," he said, "I

do not think that I have ever encountered anything quite so astonishing. That letter must have been placed there while I was in the apartment above. Your cook, your maid, are out. Certainly you did not place it there yourself. And yet we know that someone has been in this room, or at least delivered the letter, during the past fifteen minutes. Had I not found it here myself, I should have been almost tempted to disbelieve it, but I am forced to admit its truth."

Mrs. Morton stood wringing her hands.

"It—it seems almost supernatural," she exclaimed. "Poor Ruth. What are we to do?"

"There is nothing supernatural about the matter, madam," Duvall remarked. "I don't doubt the explanation is simple enough, could we but hit upon it. But so far I confess I am unable to understand it." He went over to the wall which adjoined that of the house next door, and sounded it, inch by inch, with a small hammer he took from his bag of tools. The operation required several minutes. When he had completed it, he tossed the hammer back into his kit in disgust. "Brick, of course," he said, "and perfectly solid." He turned toward the door.

"What are you going to do now?" Mrs. Morton asked.

"Try to find out something through this telegram. And also, investigate the house next door."

"But, you will come back? I am afraid."

"I shall be at your call at all times, Mrs. Morton. If anything of interest occurs, notify me here." He drew a card from his pocket and wrote upon it the name of his hotel. "Say nothing to your daughter about these new threats. I shall probably see you again later in the day." Shouldering his kit of tools, Duvall left the apartment. He was by no means satisfied with the results of his visit. In fact there had apparently been no results at all.

CHAPTER V

DUVALL'S first move, after leaving Mrs. Morton's apartment that morning, was to enter the taxicab which had been waiting for him at the door and return to his hotel. A light overcoat which he had in the vehicle concealed his workman's disguise sufficiently to enable him to reach his room without exciting comment. Once there, he changed his clothes, putting on a professional looking frock coat, and adjusting a pair of shell-rimmed eyeglasses to complete the slight disguise. Thus equipped, he once more set out.

Grace had left a note for him, saying that she had gone shopping. Beside it lay the photograph of Ruth Morton, which he had, he remembered, left on his chiffonier while putting on his workman's clothes that morning. At the foot of her hastily written note Grace had added a postscript. "Is *this* the reason for your sudden interest in motion pictures?" it read. "Well, I'll admit she's a raving beauty, Richard, but I'll bet she isn't half as nice as

I am." Duvall read the note with a smile. Grace was always such a thoroughly good comrade.

Leaving the hotel, he went to the telegraph office from which the message to Ruth Morton had been delivered that morning. It was on Columbus Avenue, some four blocks from the Mortons' apartment.

"Can you tell me where this telegram was sent from?" he asked. The message showed that it had been filed, as well as delivered, within the city limits.

The man behind the desk looked up his records.

"It was sent from the main office on lower Broadway, at 8.30," he said, briefly.

Duvall thanked him, then turned away. Although he realized that he could scarcely hope to obtain even a scanty description of the sender of the telegram from the main office, he determined to go there. First, however, he walked back toward the Mortons' apartment, and going up the steps of the brownstone house adjoining, rang the doorbell.

A neat maid-servant opened the door. Duvall favored her with a smile, at the same time taking a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"I am making some corrections in the city directory," he said. "Will you please give me the names of all the persons living in this house."

The girl stared at him for a moment, but his prosperous appearance, his businesslike manner, disarmed any suspicion she may have felt.

"There's—there's Mr. William Perkins," she said, "and Mrs. Perkins, and Mr. Robert, that's Mr. Perkins' son, and—and Miss Elizabeth, although she's away at boarding school, and—and Emily Thompson, the cook, and—and me. My name's Mary. Mary Wickes."

"Thank you, Mary," Duvall replied, entering the names carefully in his notebook. "And Mr. Perkins, the elder Mr. Perkins, I mean, is he the lawyer?"

"No, sir. It's Mr. Robert that's the lawyer, sir. Mr. William Perkins is in the leather business."

"Ah, yes. I see. Thank you very much indeed. And there are no boarders, or other persons whatever living in the house?"

"No, sir. Not any, sir."

Duvall closed his book and put it carefully in his pocket.

"Now, Mary," he continued. "Just one more question. Does any one sleep in the attic?"

"The attic, sir? Why, no sir. Cook and I sleep on the fourth floor, sir, but the attic isn't used, ex-

cept for storage, sir. Are you going to put that in the directory too, sir?" The girl regarded him with wondering eyes.

"No, Mary. Not in the directory. But we want to be sure not to omit any names, and I thought that if there was anyone living in the attic——" he paused.

"No one, as I've told you. Nobody ever goes up there, so far as I know. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes. That's all. Thank you. Good morning."

Duvall went down the steps, and proceeded to the subway station, somewhat mystified. He had handled many curious cases in the past, many that had been notable for their intricacy, their complexity of motive and detail. But here, he felt, was a case of a very different sort, the peculiarity of which lay in its astonishing lack of clues of any sort. Usually in the past there had been motives, evidence, traces of some kind or other, upon which to build a case. Here there was nothing, except the three mysterious letters, the one equally mysterious telegram. He felt baffled, uncertain which way to turn. In rather a dissatisfied frame of mind he made his way to the telegraph office in lower Broadway.

There were several clerks engaged in receiving messages. He approached one of them.

"This telegram," he said, holding out the slip of yellow paper Mrs. Morton had given him, "was sent from this office at half past eight this morning. Can you by any chance give me a description of the person who sent it?" He leaned over and addressed the clerk in a low tone. "I am a detective," he said. "The telegram is part of a blackmailing scheme."

The man looked at him for a moment, and then consulted with an older man, evidently his superior. The latter came forward.

"I received this message myself, sir," he said. "I remember it, because of its peculiar wording. What is it you wish to know?"

"I would like a description of the person who sent it," Duvall told him.

The man thought for a moment.

"I'm not able to tell you much," he said. "It was a woman—I didn't notice particularly whether she was young or old. In fact, she didn't give me a chance, just laid the message and the money down, and went right out. She evidently knew the rate, for the amount she left was correct. I took the message and read it, without noticing her particu-

larly, and then, when I had finished reading it and looked up, she had gone."

"Then you can't tell me anything about her?" Duvall asked, greatly disappointed.

"Not a thing. I remember it was a woman, and my general impression is that she was rather young and small, but I can't be at all sure. You see, sir, a great many persons come in, during the day, and we haven't time to take note of them particularly. As I say, I read the telegram first, and counted the words. By that time she had left the office."

Duvall thanked the man for his information and made his way to the street. Something at least had been gained. The person who was hounding Ruth Morton was a woman.

By this he was not at all surprised. He had felt for some time that Ruth's enemy was, in all probability, some jealous and envious movie actress who, herself unsuccessful, resented the youth and beauty of her successful rival. He called a taxi and directed the driver to take him out to the studio of the company with which Ruth was connected. Here, in all probability, was to be found the woman he sought.

The journey consumed considerably over an hour, and it was lunch time when he finally drew up before

the entrance to the series of studio buildings. Before entering he went to a nearby restaurant to get a bite to eat.

It was a small and rather cheap place, but at this hour was crowded with the employees of the big company. Duvall at first could not find a seat, but presently discovered one at a table not far from the door, at which were seated some young men, apparently stenographers or clerks.

While waiting for his order of sandwiches and milk, the detective occupied himself with a newspaper. He was not reading it, however, although he pretended to be deeply engrossed in its contents. He was in reality listening to the gossip of the studio, which rose in a chorus about him.

From a nearby table came the voice of a woman, evidently a great admirer of Ruth Morton.

"I tell you," she said, "that new film that she finished last week, An American Beauty, is going to be a knockout. She's the swellest thing on the screen. Got 'em *all* faded, *I* think."

"Think so?" questioned one of her companions. "I'm pretty strong for Helen Ward, myself."

"Ruth Morton won't last," remarked a third, in a petulant voice.

"Course she'll last. Say—ain't that a bear of a title? An American Beauty. She always seems like a beautiful big rose, to me."

"Well, roses don't last, do they?" asked the petulant voice again. "Not very long, anyway."

Duvall turned suddenly in an effort to see the face of the speaker, but try as he would, he was unable to do so. Two of the girls sat with their backs to him. He could not manage to catch a glimpse of either of them. Almost as he turned, the three rose and made their way to the street. For a moment he thought of following them, but the idea seemed absurd. These twelve dollar a week stenographers or clerks could have no part in the plot against Miss Morton. And yet, there was something startling in the young woman's words. "Roses don't last." The telegram received by Ruth Morton that morning had contained almost the same phrase. "Even the beauty of the rose cannot endure." Then he remembered the title of the new film of which the girls had spoken, and smiled at his own suspicions. "An American Beauty." It would be natural, perfectly natural for anyone to refer to Ruth as a rose, with that title for her latest

picture. He dismissed the matter from his mind, and proceeded to make a hasty lunch.

At the entrance of the studio he explained that he was a writer of special articles for the Sunday papers, and had come to "write up" the life at the studios. He was promptly turned over to one of the officials who, after a few inquiries, seemed delighted at the opportunity to obtain free publicity for his company and its stars.

"I want particularly to give a sketch of Miss Ruth Morton," he said. "She seems to be such a universal favorite."

"A most delightful and charming woman," his companion asserted, with a pleased smile. "Come this way. You may be able to see her at work." He led Duvall down a long corridor, and into one of the big studio rooms.

The first impression Duvall got was that of utter confusion. People were darting here and there, in ordinary clothes, or in all sorts of makeups. Stage carpenters were creating a terrific racket, building a new scene. A tangle of electric light cables, a blinding glare from the arcs, a confusion of voices, a wilderness of scenery and "props" all combined to create an impression quite the reverse of what

he had expected. Here, he felt, was something very different from the theater, something bigger, yet more elemental, in which vast sums were expended daily to amuse a vaster indeed, a world-wide, audience. He sat down upon a box, and inspected the scene before him.

"Miss Morton will be on in a few moments," his guide said.

Duvall nodded. His attention was fixed upon the little drama going on before him. He knew nothing of the plot of the play, but the mechanical features of the operation held his interest keenly. The brilliant electric lights, the setting of the little room, the actors in their ghastly greenish makeups, the camera man, grinding stolidly away at his machine, the director, hovering about like a hawk, watching every movement, every gesture, with a superlatively critical eye, all spoke to him of a new world, and one with which he was not in the least familiar.

Suddenly he saw the lovely face of Ruth Morton, as the girl appeared from an open doorway. She did not take part in the picture at once, but stood chatting with the director, awaiting the moment when she would make her entrance. Duvall watched

"Come to my house some evening, and I'll tell you all about being a 'movie' star"

her intently. Her face, he thought, was drawn, nervous, her expression one of fear. She seemed suspicious of every one who came near her, as though she suspected that every stage hand, every electrician or helper, had in his possession a bottle of vitriol, which he only awaited the moment to hurl in her face. That the girl's nervous manner, her strained and tense expression, was evident to others as well as to himself, he realized from a remark his companion made to him.

"Miss Morton doesn't seem herself to-day," he said. "She must have something on her mind. I shouldn't be surprised if she has been working too hard lately."

Duvall made no reply. He was watching, not only Ruth, but those about her. In particular he observed the other women in the cast. It seemed not improbable that among them he would find the one whose envy had led to the sending of the threats Ruth had been receiving.

Presently the scene was finished, and Ruth, in response to a call from Duvall's companion, came toward them.

"Miss Morton," the latter said, "let me present Mr. Richards." This was the name Duvall had

given. "He is anxious to meet you, and write you up for one of the newspapers."

Ruth gave him her hand with a smile which Duvall saw clearly enough was forced. The girl was palpably worn, *distrait*.

"I'm not going to interview you now, Miss Morton," he said. "I can understand that you must be tired, after posing all the morning. Let me come and see you sometime when you are more at leisure."

She thanked him with a smile, this time quite genuine.

"I'm not feeling very well this afternoon," she said. "Come to my home some evening, or better still, on Sunday, and I'll tell you all I know about being a 'movie' star. So glad to have met you." She was just about to turn away, when a small boy came up, carrying in his hand a flat package, wrapped in brown paper. Duvall observed that the package had upon it a typewritten address.

"Something for you, Miss Morton," he said, and placed the package in Ruth's hand.

The girl looked at it for a moment in dismay. Then realizing that the eyes of the two men were bent curiously upon her, she recovered herself and tore open the brown paper envelope. Duvall, with

one eye on the boy, saw that he had disappeared through the door leading to the company's executive offices.

Suddenly Ruth, who had been examining the contents of the package, gave a faint cry, and swayed backward, as though about to fall. Duvall's companion sprang to her assistance, while Duvall himself snatched the object which had so affected her from her hand and hastily examined it.

It was a photograph of Ruth Morton herself, but Duvall, as he gazed at it, comprehended instantly the effect it had produced upon the girl's overwrought nerves. Some clever hand had been at work upon the photograph, retouching it, changing its lovely expression, until the portrait, instead of being a thing of beauty, grinned up at him in frightful hideousness. The blank, sightless eyes, the haggard cheeks, the thin wasted lips, the protruding and jagged teeth, all created an impression shocking beyond belief. And yet, the result had been obtained by the addition of but a few simple lines and shadows.

Along the blank space at the bottom of the picture a line of typewritten characters had been placed. Duvall glanced at them. "As you will look soon,"

the words read. Below them was fixed the grinning Death's head seal. Unobserved in the confusion, Duvall thrust the photograph into his pocket, and turned to Ruth and the others.

The girl had recovered herself by now, and was being conducted to her dressing room by a solicitous crowd. So far as Duvall would see, she had said nothing to those about her as to the cause of her sudden indisposition, and with the exception of the man who had been Duvall's guide, none of them had observed the opening of the package containing the photograph, nor its immediate effect upon her.

The latter, however, whose name was Baker, came over to Duvall and addressed him.

"What was it about that photograph that upset Miss Morton so?" he asked. "And what has become of it?"

Duvall drew him to one side.

"Let us go to your office, Mr. Baker," he said. "I have a most important matter to discuss with you."

Baker regarded the detective for a moment in surprise, then, seeing that Duvall was very much in earnest, he led the way to his private office.

"I am not a newspaper writer, Mr. Baker,"

Duvall said, as soon as they were seated. "As a matter of fact, I am a detective, in the employ of Mrs. Morton, Ruth Morton's mother."

"A detective?" he questioned. "Why has Miss Morton's mother employed a detective?"

"Because someone is persecuting the girl, by sending her threatening letters, saying that her beauty is to be destroyed. This photograph"—he drew the hideous picture from his pocket—"is a sample of their work."

Mr. Baker regarded the photograph for a moment in silence, then rose with a growl of rage and struck his clenched fist upon the desk.

"This is outrageous—damnable!" he cried. "It cannot go on. No wonder the poor girl looked tired out. We will put the matter in the hands of the police. We will spend any amount of money——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Baker," Duvall interrupted, urging the angry man back into his chair. "Nothing is to be gained by giving any publicity to this matter. The scoundrels who are at the bottom of it will at once be warned, and then our chance of catching them will be small indeed. So far, not a soul knows that I am working on this case, outside of Mrs. Morton, and yourself. Even Miss

Ruth does not know it. I have already unearthed some very surprising things connected with the case, although I have been occupied with it only since this morning. Within a few days, I have no doubt, I shall be able to place my hands upon the person or persons responsible for the trouble, but I must insist that I be given a free hand."

"But," Mr. Baker expostulated, "she may be in immediate danger. At any moment something may happen that would ruin her beauty, and incidentally, ruin us as well. She is our star attraction."

"I do not think the danger is immediate," Duvall replied gravely. "All the threats so far received set thirty days as the period within which the attack is to be made. Only three days have passed, so far. And in addition, Miss Morton is being very carefully guarded."

"She certainly shall be while she is here at the studio," Mr. Baker exclaimed. "But, man, something ought to be done—at once."

"The first thing to be done is to find out how that photograph got here—who brought it—and when. It was not delivered by mail. Look here." He handed the angry official the torn manilla en-

velope, which Ruth, in her excitement, had dropped upon the floor.

Mr. Baker regarded it for a moment in angry silence, then pressed an electric button upon his desk. A young woman responded.

"Send Jim here," he said. The girl nodded and withdrew.

A few moments later a freckled-faced boy of twelve or fourteen came in. Duvall saw that it was the same boy who had brought in the photograph.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes. Where did you get the package you delivered to Miss Morton a little while ago?"

"From Mr. Curry, sir."

"Good." Mr. Baker rose and went toward the door. "Come with me," he said to Duvall, "and you too, Jim." The three of them went along the corridor, arriving presently at the main entrance to the building. An elderly man sat at a high desk behind a wire grating.

"Curry," Mr. Baker burst out, "this boy tells me you gave him a package for Miss Morton a while ago."

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it?"

The man looked up in surprise.

"Why, sir, someone left it here—on my desk. I don't know who, sir. Right after lunch, it was. You know people deliver things here all the time. I didn't take any particular notice how it got here. It was just pushed through the window, I guess, same as usual. There was a lot of mail in the rack, after lunch, and everybody asking for theirs as they came in. In fact, I don't remember seeing the package handed in at all. Just found it lying on my desk, along with a lot of letters and things. Why, sir. Is anything wrong?"

Baker turned to Duvall in disgust.

"No system here at all," he grumbled. "The trail is lost, of course. Half a hundred people come through here every hour. That's all, Jim," he said, turning to the boy, who disappeared at once. Accompanied by Duvall, Baker returned to the private office.

"Well?" Mr. Baker asked. "What next?"

"How many typewriters have you in your offices, Mr. Baker? Machines, I mean, not operators."

"About thirty, I guess. Or maybe thirty-five. Why?"

"I want you to get me a sample of the writing of each machine, without letting anyone know about it. Put each one on a separate sheet of paper, with a note added, stating whose machine it is—that is, in whose office."

Mr. Baker nodded. "I'll do it to-night," he said. "Attend to it myself. I see your idea. You think this thing is the work of someone inside the studio."

"It may be, I don't know. But I mean to find out."

"All right. Anything else?"

"Yes. Tell me something about this new film you've just gotten out. 'An American Beauty,' I think it is called."

Mr. Baker's manner became enthusiastic.

"Greatest film Ruth Morton ever did," he exclaimed. "A knockout. It is to be shown at the Grand, on Broadway, to-morrow night. First time on the screen. You'd better look it over."

"I probably shall. Now, tell me this. If I wanted to add anything to that picture, put in an insert, I believe you call it, could I do so, if I told you about it to-morrow?"

"Well—it might be done," Mr. Baker replied,

dubiously. "But we wouldn't want to change the film any. It's perfect as it is."

"I don't doubt that. I have no idea of improving it in any way. But it is just possible that I may have a scheme that will help us to catch these people who are threatening Miss Morton. I'll tell you more about it, to-morrow. Meanwhile, don't forget about the typewriter samples. I'll see you in the morning." He rose. "And for the present, I think it would be best for you to keep what I have told you to yourself."

Mr. Baker nodded.

"I'll do that," he said, putting out his hand. "For the present, at least. But don't forget, Mr. Duvall, that this is a very vital matter to our company, and we can't afford to take any chances."

"I realize that fully. You can depend on me. I intend to save Miss Morton from any harm, not primarily on your company's account, but on her own. Good day."

"Good day, and the best of luck."

Duvall went toward the entrance, and in the corridor met Mrs. Morton. She was about to pass him, but he detained her.

"Twenty-seven days more," he whispered to her.

She turned sharply, a look of fear upon her face, but as she recognized Duvall, her expression changed.

"Oh—it's you," she exclaimed. "I've just come down in the car, to take Ruth home. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, so far. At least no harm has come to your daughter. But I am sorry to say that she has received another warning."

"Here?" Mrs. Morton started, and glanced about in alarm.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"A photograph." Duvall explained the contents of the mysterious package, but did not show the hideous picture to the girl's mother.

"And you haven't found out anything yet?"

"Nothing definite. There has scarcely been time. But we will. You may be sure of that."

"Have you seen Ruth?" Mrs. Morton asked.

"Yes. Mr. Baker introduced me to her. She thinks I am a newspaper man, who wants to write a special article about her for one of the Sunday papers. She suggested that I call at your house some evening, or possibly Sunday. If you are

going back to town soon, I think it might be a good idea for me to drive back with you."

"By all means. I shall feel much safer. Suppose you wait for us at the entrance. I shall not be long."

Duvall nodded, and strolled toward the street, his mind busy with the events of the day. He stood for quite a while near the door, watching the people who came in and out. Many of them were women. He wondered if among them was the woman who was responsible for the threats of the past three days. It seemed improbable, and yet, there were indications that it was within the studio, rather than outside it, that the guilty person was to be found.

Mrs. Morton came out presently, accompanied by Ruth. The girl looked pale and troubled. Duvall went up to her.

"I have met your mother, Miss Morton," he said, "and she has very kindly suggested that I ride back to the city with you."

The girl nodded, without particular interest.

"We shall be very glad to have you," she said, "but you will excuse me, I know, if I do not talk to you about my work. I am feeling rather bad

to-day, and I'm sure I couldn't tell you anything interesting."

"I'm sure I would not expect it, under the circumstances," Duvall replied, as Miss Morton, accompanied by her mother, went toward the automobile that stood near the entrance. "I don't doubt your work is full of trying incidents."

"Oh, it isn't my work," the girl replied, as he assisted her into the car. "I love my work. But there are other things." She glanced toward her mother with a tired smile, then sank back upon the cushions.

A moment later they were whirling toward the city.

CHAPTER VI

DUVALL'S ride back to town with Mrs. Morton and Ruth was quite uneventful. The latter, as she had explained, was ill, weak, indisposed to talk. Duvall and Mrs. Morton kept up a brisk conversation upon topics of the day, but both knew that it was of the girl they were thinking, and their interest in the subjects they discussed was clearly forced. Both were glad when the car at last stopped before the apartment building, and the long ride was over.

Mrs. Morton invited Duvall to come in and dine with them, and he promptly accepted. Ruth seemed indifferent. Assisted by her maid, she left the car and on reaching the apartment, at once went to her room.

"You will excuse me, I know," she said to Duvall. "I am tired out, and think I had better lie down at once. Dora will bring me some dinner," she said, turning to her mother.

Duvall and Mrs. Morton ate their dinner in

silence. Some sense of oppression, of impending evil, hung over them both. Mrs. Morton left the table toward the close of the meal, and went to her daughter's room. With the solicitude of the typical mother she arranged the windows. That opening to the fire escape she raised to its full height. The one facing upon the court she left as it was, raised some six or eight inches. Then, having kissed her daughter good night, she returned to the library, where Duvall sat smoking a cigar.

"Ruth has gone to bed," she told him. "Both the windows in her room are open, the one on the fire-escape wide, the other partly raised."

Duvall looked at her with an expression of doubt.

"I think it would be better, for the present," he said, "to close and fasten the one opening on the fire escape. We cannot tell to what danger your daughter may be exposed."

Mrs. Morton rose and left the room.

"I will do as you advise," she said. Going to Ruth's bedroom she closed and fastened the window in question, then she went back to the library.

"Have you hit upon any theory to account for the sending of these letters?" she asked.

Duvall shook his head.

"The whole thing is very mysterious," he said. "Of course it was easy enough for anyone to leave the photograph at the studio this afternoon. In fact it might readily have been done by one of the other actresses, who might be jealous of your daughter's success. But if the thing was done by anyone employed at the studio, how can we account for the message left in the bedroom at half-past nine this morning, the one we found on the floor? If the woman who is responsible for these threats was at the studio this morning, how could she arrange to have the note left in your daughter's bedroom here at the same hour? That would seem to imply a confederate. I confess that the entire matter is for the moment beyond me."

"Were you able to find out anything concerning the telegram which came this morning?"

"Nothing, except that it was sent by a woman. I was not surprised to learn that. Naturally I should expect that a woman was responsible for these threats. But what woman? That is the question." He sat for a long time, thinking, his eyes fixed upon the floor.

Suddenly there came a ring at the doorbell. Mrs. Morton, without waiting for the maid, sprang to

the hall, with Duvall close at her heels. As she threw it open, they saw a man standing in the doorway. Duvall was the first to recognize their caller.

"How do you do, Mr. Baker," he said, holding out his hand.

Mr. Baker came in, and greeted Mrs. Morton.

"I didn't expect to find Mr. Duvall here," he said. "In fact, I came to you to get his hotel address. Luckily I won't need it, now."

"Anything new?" Duvall asked, as they returned to the library.

"Nothing much. I got those samples of the writing of the various typewriters, as you requested," Baker replied, "and I thought that instead of waiting until to-morrow, it would be better to bring them to you to-night." He took a sheaf of papers from his pocket. "There are thirty-two in all. What are you going to do with them?" He placed the papers in Duvall's hand.

The latter sat down at the library table and placed the sheets of paper before him.

"Of course you know," he said to Baker, "that every typewriting machine has its unmistakable peculiarities. It is almost impossible to find a machine that has been used at all, that has not developed

certain individual defects, or qualities, found in no other machine. Now let us take for instance the letters that Miss Morton has received during the past few days. They have all been written on the same machine, and I am of the opinion that it is a fairly old one. While going down to the studio this afternoon, I worked out and wrote down in my note-book the particular features which appear in all these letters." He took a small leather-covered book from his pocket.

"In the first place," he said, "the letter 'a' throughout the several communications is always found to be out of line. The key bar is doubtless a trifle bent. Let us, therefore, see if, in any of the samples you have brought me, there exists a similar defect."

He took the samples of writing, one by one, and after scrutinizing them carefully, passed them over to Baker, who likewise subjected them to a critical examination. When their work was completed, it was found that of the thirty-two samples, the displacement of the letter "a" occurred in but three, and in one of these it was so slight as to be scarcely noticeable. Duvall laid the three pages to one side.

"A second fault shown in the typewriting of the letters," he said, "is to be found in the capital 'W.' Its lower right-hand corner has been worn or broken off, so that it invariably fails to register." He handed one of the letters to Baker. "See here, and here. The corner of the 'W' instead of being clear and distinct, is blunt and defective. Let us see whether a similar fault is to be found in any one of these three samples." He picked up the three sheets of paper that he had placed to one side.

As he examined them, Mr. Baker and Mrs. Morton saw a shadow of disappointment cross his face. He handed the three pages to Baker.

"The threatening letters were not written on any machine at your studio," he said.

Baker took the pages and looked them over carefully.

"No," he said at length. "You are right. None of these show the second defect you have named."

"Well," observed Duvall cheerfully, "we have accomplished something, at least. We know that these letters were not written at the studio, and it seems reasonably certain that the woman we are looking for has a typewriter in her rooms, or wher-

ever she may live. Of course she might have had the typewriting done by some public stenographer, but I consider it unlikely. A person sending threats of this character would not be apt to entrust so dangerous a secret to a third person. We must therefore make up our minds to find a woman who has a typewriting machine, and knows how to use it."

"There are probably a hundred thousand such women in New York," Baker observed, gloomily.

"No doubt. But we have more information than that about the person who sent these letters."

"What, for instance?" asked Baker and Mrs. Morton in a breath.

"Well, in the first place, this woman was able to secure possession of a photograph of Miss Morton." He took the hideously distorted picture from his pocket. "Do either of you know where this photograph was made?"

Mrs. Morton examined the picture with a shudder. Then she rose, went to a cabinet at the other end of the room, and took out an album. Returning to the table, she placed the book before her, and began to turn the pages. In a few moments she found what she was looking for, a duplicate of the

likeness which lay before them, with the exception, of course, of its frightful distortions.

"This picture was made by Gibson, on Fifth Avenue," she said, referring to the photograph in the book. Both Baker and Duvall saw at once that on the retouched picture, the name of the photographer had been scratched off.

"How many of them were made, and what became of them?" Duvall asked quickly.

"Ordinarily I could not answer such a question," Mrs. Morton replied, "for Ruth has had many photographs taken, and we have not of course kept a record of them, or what has become of them, but in this particular case I happen to remember that she did not like the pose particularly, and ordered but half a dozen. I do not think that she gave any of them away. If I am right in my supposition, there should be five more here in the apartment." Closing the book, Mrs. Morton went to the cabinet again, and took out a portfolio containing numberless photographs of her daughter in all sorts of poses.

After some searching, she produced a brown-paper envelope, containing a number of pictures, all taken by the same photographer, at the same

time. There were in the envelope four copies of the photograph, the fifth of which was contained in the album.

"Evidently one has been given away," Duvall exclaimed. "Now if we can only find out to whom, our search for the writer of these letters may be very quickly ended."

Mr. Baker regarded them both with a puzzled look.

"I have seen that picture before," he said, "and of course I could not have done so, had I not seen the one that is missing." He sat for a while in silence, searching his recollection for a solution of the problem. Suddenly he spoke. "There was a picture like that in my office, at one time," he exclaimed. "Miss Morton sent a number down, for advertising purposes, and I am positive that this one was among them. I remember distinctly the pose of the head, the unusual arrangement of the hair. That photograph should be in our files. The fact that it has been taken out shows that the person who has been writing these letters is a member of our own staff, or at least has access to our files."

"That does not necessarily follow," observed Duvall.

"Why not?"

"Because the picture might have been obtained from the photographer."

"But they are not allowed to dispose of the portraits of others, without the sitter's permission."

"I know that, but they sometimes do so, especially in the case of anyone so well known as Miss Morton. She has become a sort of public character."

"Well," remarked Duvall, "we can readily find out, in the morning. You, Mr. Baker, can go through your files, and should you find the photograph to be there, I will take the matter up with the photographer. If, on the contrary, the picture is missing, it will be fairly conclusive evidence that the person or persons we are looking for are in some way connected with the studio."

"I will make an investigation the first thing in the morning," Mr. Baker announced, rising. "Do you expect to be at the studio early, Mr. Duvall?"

"Yes. Quite early."

"Then we had best leave matters until then. Good night. Good night, Mrs. Morton." He turned and started toward the door.

He had proceeded but a few steps, when the three

occupants of the room were startled by a series of sudden and agonizing cries. From the rear of the apartment came a succession of screams so piercing in their intensity, so filled with horror, that they found themselves for a moment unable to stir. Then Mrs. Morton gave a cry of anguish, and darted out into the hall, closely followed by Duvall and Mr. Baker.

The screams continued, filling the entire apartment with their clamor. That the voice which uttered them was that of Ruth Morton none of the three doubted for a moment. With sinking hearts they went on, prepared for the worst. Duvall found himself dreading the moment when they should reach the bedroom door, and face the girl, her beauty, perhaps, disfigured beyond all recognition.

There was a sharp turn, at the end of the hall, into a shorter cross hall, at the end of which was the door of Ruth's bedroom. It was closed, but as though in response to Mrs. Morton's agonized appeals, it suddenly opened as they reached it, and Ruth Morton, pale as death, appeared.

With wide open eyes staring straight ahead, she half stepped, half fell through the doorway, her slender figure clothed only in her night dress.

"Ruth," Mrs. Morton screamed, as she caught sight of her daughter.

The girl tried to say something, but her tongue failed her. Then, with a faint moan, she lurched forward and fell limply into her mother's arms.

PART II

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Duvall, Mr. Baker, of the motion picture company, and Mrs. Morton rushed down the hallway of the latter's apartment in response to the screams from Ruth's bedroom, they were one and all convinced that the girl had suffered some terrible injury—that the mysterious threats to destroy her beauty which had been made during the past few days had been converted into some frightful reality.

One glance at the girl's white face as she fell fainting into her mother's arms told the detective that their fears had been, to that extent at least, groundless. The girl's lovely features, although drawn and contorted by fear, showed no signs of the disfigurement they feared.

Leaving the girl to her mother's care, Duvall, closely followed by Baker, dashed into the bedroom, and at once switched on the lights.

The place, to the intense surprise of both, presented a picture of perfect quiet and order. The bed clothing was slightly disarranged, but this of course was but natural, since Ruth had sprung up under the influence of some terrible fear, and rushed from the room. Everything else seemed in its place.

Duvall's first act was to examine the window. The one fronting on the fire escape was closed and tightly fastened. It was perfectly clear that no one had entered the room in that way.

The other window, facing on the court, was raised a few inches, just as Mrs. Morton had left it half an hour before. Duvall turned to his companion with a juzzled frown.

"I had supposed, Mr. Baker," he said, "that someone had entered this room, and frightened Miss Morton while she was asleep, but that is impossible. The windows have not been disturbed."

Baker glanced at the one which faced the court.

"That one may have been," he said, indicating it with a nod. "Someone may have come in that way, raising the window to effect an entrance, and lowering it again after leaving."

"I admit that what you say would be possible, were there any way in which the window might be

reached from outside," Duvall replied, "but if you will look out, and tell me how anyone could make an entrance from the court, I will agree to the possibility you suggest."

Baker raised the window, and glanced out.

"The apartment above," Duvall went on, "is unoccupied, and the window above is closed and fastened. The little attic in the adjoining house is unused, although that is not important, since no one could reach this window from it, in any event. Can you suggest any other way?"

Mr. Baker shook his head.

"She must have been frightened by some terrible nightmare," he said. "I do not wonder at it. She has gone through enough to upset anybody's nerves. Suppose we go back and question her."

"Just a moment," exclaimed Duvall. Then he dropped upon his knees beside the disordered bed, and began to examine the surface of the counterpane with minute care.

"What is it?" Baker asked, joining him.

"I don't know—yet," returned Duvall, as he took a magnifying glass from his pocket and proceeded to scrutinize with the greatest interest some marks upon the counterpane's surface. Presently he rose,

replaced the glass in his pocket, and turned to his companion.

"There is something very astonishing about this whole affair," he exclaimed. "What do you make of those?" He indicated a series of dark smudges upon the bedspread, arranged in little groups.

Baker bent over and examined the marks with an exclamation of surprise.

"Why—they look like finger prints," he cried. "Large finger prints."

"It is impossible to say whether they are finger prints or not," Duvall replied. "As you see, there are a great many of them, very confusingly arranged. But there is something else, that you have not noticed. What do you suppose could have made a mark like this?" He pointed to a long straight dark line, which extended half way across the counterpane, and pointed directly toward the window which faced upon the court. The line was very faint, but clearly defined, as though someone had laid a thin dusty stick across the bed.

"I can't make anything of it," Baker exclaimed, gazing toward the window.

"Nor can I," said Duvall. "At one time, because of certain indentations on the letters found in this

room, I had thought that they might have been introduced through the partly opened window by means of a long rod, a fishing pole, perhaps. This mark on the counterpane appears to bear out that theory. The smudges which look like finger prints may have been merely the points at which the end of the pole, or whatever was attached to the end of the pole, came in contact with the bed. All that is perfectly supposable. But you can see for yourself that if a long pole were thrust through the window, raised as the latter was but a trifle above the level of the bed, the other end of such a pole must of necessity have been held at approximately the same level, and the only point outside the window from which it could have been so held is *in the air, forty feet above the bottom of the court!* The thing is absurd."

"There is, of course, the window of the apartment below," Baker suggested. "Might not it have been used?"

"I thought of that," Duvall replied. "You can see for yourself that even a tall man standing on the window sill below, would find not only his hands, but even his head, far below the sill of this window. nor could anyone so support themselves, without

something to hold on to. But all that is beside the question. The people in the apartment below are friends of Mrs. Morton's, a middle-aged man and his wife, with two young children. They are eminently respectable people, and quite above suspicion."

"Then I give the thing up," exclaimed Baker. "Suppose we have a talk with Miss Morton."

They found the girl lying on a couch in the library, with her mother sitting beside her. She seemed very weak and quiet, but in full possession of her faculties. Duvall drew up a chair, and asked her if she felt able to tell them what had occurred.

"Yes," she replied in a faint voice, her face still showing evidences of her fright. "I will try to tell you exactly what happened."

"I had taken some medicine to make me sleep, before I got into bed, because I was very nervous and upset. When mother came back to fix the windows I was already drowsy, and just remember that she turned out the lights, and then I must have dozed.

"All of a sudden I heard a strange rasping noise, and I woke up, with the feeling that there was

someone in the room. I don't know just why I felt so sure of that, whether it was merely a sense of someone's presence, or the sound of someone moving about near my bed. I think, however, that it was the latter.

"The room was dark, of course, but enough light came through the windows to make a moving object distinguishable. I looked about, terribly frightened, but for a moment I saw nothing. The noise I had heard at first continued. Then without the least warning, a hand seemed to clutch at the bedclothes, and I saw above me, bending over me, a terrible dark face, exactly like the grinning death's head on those letters I've been getting.

"I lay perfectly still, frozen with horror, and in a moment the face had disappeared, and then I began to scream. Right after that I sprang from the bed and threw open the door, and found mother and Mr. Baker and yourself standing in the hall. That is all I know."

Duvall looked at her for a moment, puzzled.

"Are you sure you really saw someone leaning over you? Might it not have been an illusion, the result of your nervous condition?"

"No. I am certain someone was there—someone

quite tall, I should say, and with a terrible, evil face."

"It might have been a mask, of course," Duvall suggested. "Someone wearing a mask."

"Yes. It might have been. It was too dark for me to tell, of course. But I remember the eyes, for I saw them distinctly. They were only a few inches from my own." She put her hands to her face and shuddered. "It was terrible, terrible. I shall never sleep in that room again."

"There—there, dearie," Mrs. Morton whispered in a soothing voice. "You need not sleep there. You can lie right here, for the rest of the night, and I will stay with you and see that no one harms you."

"That would be best, Mrs. Morton," Duvall remarked. "And to-morrow I suggest that you and your daughter move, temporarily at least, to another location. Some quiet hotel, where you will not be subject to these terrible annoyances. I cannot imagine how it is done, but in some way, some almost superhuman way, it seems, someone can apparently either enter your daughter's room, or at least reach it from without, at will."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Ruth, somewhat mystified.

"I mean this, Miss Morton. I do not believe that there was anyone in your room to-night. I do not believe that there has ever been anyone there. But I *do* believe that the two letters we found there were introduced from without, in some mysterious way, at the end of a long pole, or rod. And I think that what frightened you so to-night was merely a mask, a grotesque representation of the seal used on the letters, and pushed toward you in some way, as you lay in bed for the purpose of terrifying you."

"But—why—why?" the girl cried.

"I cannot say. But it has occurred to me that these people, whoever they are, that are trying to injure you, may not intend any physical violence at all, at least for the present, but may be depending solely upon the terrible and insidious power of suggestion. You must bear this possibility in mind, and try to control your fears. I can readily believe that thirty days of this sort of persecution, and you would be a physical and mental wreck. But we shall stop it. You need have no fears on that score."

Mrs. Morton turned to her daughter with a few words of explanation.

"Mr. Richards, or rather, Mr. Duvall, is not a newspaper man, Ruth, but a detective, who is trying to bring the wretches who are annoying you to justice. I feel every confidence in him."

Ruth turned toward Duvall a very white and pathetic face.

"I hope you will succeed, Mr. Duvall," she said, in a weak voice. "I cannot stand much more."

"I shall, Miss Morton. And now," he turned to Mr. Baker, "I think we had better go, and let Miss Morton get some rest. I will come here in the morning, Mrs. Morton," he continued, addressing the girl's mother, "and we will consider further the question of your moving to a hotel. Meanwhile I do not think you have anything further to fear this evening. Good night."

Before leaving the apartment he made another examination of the marks upon the bedclothes, then closed and fastened both windows, and locked the door of the room.

Mr. Baker left him at the corner.

"You will come to the studio to-morrow, of course."

"By all means. I shall come down with Miss Morton and her mother. That will give us an opportunity to investigate further the matter of the missing photograph, and also to talk over that plan I had in mind concerning the new film you are to show at the Grand to-morrow night. It is barely possible that, by means of a plan I have in mind, we may be able to locate the person or persons responsible for all this trouble."

"I certainly hope so," said Baker, as he took his leave. "This thing is getting on *my* nerves, too."

Duvall made his way back to his hotel, as much mystified as ever. He had thought for a moment of spending the night on the sidewalk in front of the Mortons' apartment, watching the windows facing on the court, but his experience told him that it would be useless. The alarm which Ruth had made, the closing of the windows of her bedroom, the locking of the door, all made it highly improbable that any further attempt would be made to annoy her during the night. He walked along in a state of intense preoccupation, trying to discover some reasonable explanation of the astonishing events of the day.

Once he had an impression, a feeling, that he

was being followed, but when he turned around, there was no one in sight but a slightly tipsy man, and a couple of young girls, far down the street. He dismissed the thought from his mind, and proceeded to his hotel.

It was not yet eleven o'clock, and Grace was waiting for him in the little parlor of their suite.

"Well, Richard," she remarked, as he came in, "you've had quite a day of it."

"Yes, quite," he replied, throwing himself into a chair. "What have *you* been doing with yourself?"

"Shopping, mostly. I found it rather dull. I went to a moving picture this afternoon. Saw your friend Ruth Morton. She certainly is a very beautiful girl."

"Yes—very," Duvall replied, absently.

"Have you seen her to-day?" Grace went on, with a smile.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh—nothing. I was just thinking."

Duvall burst into a laugh, and rising, went over to his wife and kissed her.

"For heaven's sake, Grace," he said, "don't be silly. I'm not interested in motion picture actresses."

"You weren't, I'll admit, nor in motion pictures either, until recently, but perhaps you have changed. I could understand any man being fascinated by a girl like Ruth Morton."

Duvall did not pursue the question. It was a hard and fast rule between them not to discuss his professional work. And Mrs. Morton had made it a point that he should confide in no one, not even his wife.

"Well," he said, picking up an evening paper, "I'm not fascinated yet. No letters for me to-day, I suppose."

"None." Grace went on with her sewing.

They sat for a while in silence. Presently there came a knock on the door, and a boy appeared, bearing a telegram. Duvall opened it carelessly, thinking it some word from the overseer of his farm. He sat up with sudden astonishment as he read the contents of the message.

"Keep out," the telegram read, "or you will find that we can strike back."

Duvall placed the telegram in his pocket with a frown. So it appeared that in spite of all his care, his connection with the case was known. How this was possible he could not imagine. His first visit

to the Morton apartment that day had been in the guise of a workman. His subsequent appearance at the studio, and later, at the apartment, had been in the character of a newspaper man. There was only one explanation. Someone had watched him while he was making his examination of Ruth Morton's room, and, subsequently, had followed him from the apartment to his hotel. He began to realize that he was dealing with a shrewd brain, and one that acted with almost uncanny quickness and precision. He determined that, if Mrs. Morton and her daughter changed their place of residence the following day, he would do the same. He said nothing of his intentions to Grace, however. It was more than ever necessary that he preserve secrecy in this case.

"No bad news, I hope, Richard," Grace remarked, glancing up from her sewing.

"No. Nothing serious. Have you heard anything from home?"

"Yes. Everything is going along quite smoothly. The boy is well and happy, and Mrs. Preston says to stay as long as we want to."

"Well," said Duvall, rising and throwing down his newspaper, "if things don't go better than they

have been going to-day, I may have to be here some time. I've got a queer case on, Grace. I'd like to tell you about it, but I can't. But it is quite unusual. Some features to it that I have never met before."

"Oh—I wish I might help you," Grace exclaimed. "You know how often I have done so in the past."

"I know, dear. But I am bound to secrecy, for the present at least. Suppose we turn in now. I've got to get up early."

"All right," Grace said. "But if you need my help, don't hesitate to ask me. To tell you the truth, I'm having an awfully slow time."

CHAPTER VIII

DUVALL made his appearance at the Morton apartment the following morning in his ordinary guise. It was his intention, when the time came, to disappear from the case in his normal person, to reappear in it, later, in a complete disguise. But that time, he felt, had not yet arrived.

Mrs. Morton received him in fairly good spirits. Her daughter, she said, had had a restful night, in spite of her terrible experience. When Ruth rose from the breakfast table to greet him, he was gratified to find that she showed no great traces of the fright of the evening before.

"I'm feeling almost myself again, Mr. Duvall," she said. "I've made up my mind not to let these people frighten me again."

"Nothing further occurred last night, of course," Duvall asked.

"Nothing, replied Mrs. Morton. "I could almost believe the whole thing a horrible dream."

They did not touch on the question of going to a hotel, during the short interval that elapsed before they set out for the studio. Duvall was anxious to see Mr. Baker. He hoped sincerely that by means of the photograph which had been in the company's files, some trace of the persons responsible for the threats might be obtained.

The trip to the studio was made most uneventfully, and Ruth started in witl her work in very good spirits. Duvall, leaving the girl with her mother, sought out Mr. Baker in the latter's private office.

"Hello!" Baker cried, grasping the detective's hand warmly. "Anything new?"

"Not a thing. How about the photograph we were going to trace?"

Mr. Baker frowned.

"It's a curious thing," he replied. "Most curious. The picture in question was, I find, taken from the files by Mr. Moore, our president, and placed on his desk. He always admired it, and kept it there, along with a number of others, to show to persons calling upon him. Now, it seems, it has disappeared. There is not the slightest trace of it."

"But," Duvall objected, "who could have taken it?"

"A dozen people. Half a hundred, I guess. You see, Mr. Moore's office is a big room, just beyond here." He rose, and led the detective through a short corridor. "Here it is," he went on, throwing open the door. "This is where Mr. Moore receives his callers. It is his reception room, and no private papers are kept here. Those are all in the smaller office adjoining. This room is open at any time. After Mr. Moore leaves in the evening, and he often leaves early, anyone might come in here. And when the offices are closed, at night, I suppose any employee of the company might look in, if he cared to do so, without anyone objecting. You see, this is a sort of public room. The inner office is always kept locked, but there has never seemed to be any good reason for locking this one."

"Still, although you cannot tell who has taken the picture, it seems clear enough that it must have been removed by some one employed in the studio."

"Even that is by no means certain. So many people come here every day. All sorts of visitors, writers, actors, and the like. After business hours I don't doubt any number of persons enter this

room, to look at the pictures of our great successes that hang on its walls. And then there are the caretakers, the scrub-women, and their friends. I find that they, many of them, bring in outsiders, after working hours, to look at the studio, and the famous offices. Of course it should not be, and it will not be, in the future, but up to now we have rather welcomed people from outside. It seemed good advertising."

Duvall followed his companion back to his office.

"Then this clue, like all the others in this singular case," he remarked, "seems to end in a blind alley."

"It seems so," assented Mr. Baker, gloomily. "What was your plan about the new film we're going to show to-night?"

Duvall was about to speak, but before he could do so, they heard a slight commotion in the hall outside. Then someone rapped violently on the door.

Both he and Baker sprang to their feet.

"Come in," the latter cried.

The door was flung open, and Mr. Edwards, the director, who was making the picture upon which Ruth Morton was working, strode hastily into the room.

"Mr. Baker!" he exclaimed, then paused upon seeing Duvall.

"What is it?" Baker replied.

"Will you look here a minute, please?"

Baker went up to him, his face showing the greatest uneasiness.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Anything wrong?"

"Yes. Miss Morton was going through the scene in the first part, where she gets the telegram, you know, and when she opened the message, and read it, she fainted."

"Fainted? What was in the telegram to make her faint?"

"Well, it ought to have read, 'Will call for you to-night, with marriage license—Jimmy.' That was the prop message we had prepared. But somebody must have substituted another one for it. This is what she read." He handed Baker a yellow slip of paper. "I can't make anything out of it."

Baker snatched the telegram from his hand with a growl of rage, and read it hastily. Then he passed it over to Duvall.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

Duvall gazed at the telegram with a feeling of helpless anger.

"Twenty-six days more," it read. "When you appear in your new picture at the Grand to-night, it will be your last. I shall be there." The grinning death's head seal was appended in lieu of a signature, as before.

A feeling of resentment swept over the detective. It seemed that these people acted as they saw fit, with supreme indifference to the fact that he was on their trail. Never before had he felt his skill so flouted, his ability made so light of. And yet, as usual, the message had apparently been delivered in such a way as to make tracing it impossible.

"Still at it, it seems," Mr. Baker remarked. "This thing has got to stop, and at once. I don't propose to let anybody make a monkey of me."

Duvall turned to the director, Mr. Edwards.

"Who prepared the original telegram?" he asked quickly.

Mr. Edwards looked at the detective in surprise, evidently wondering what this stranger had to do with the matter.

"Answer, Edwards. It's all right," snapped Mr. Baker.

"I prepared the property telegram," the director answered.

"When?"

"Last night. I knew it would be needed to-day."

"What did you do with it?"

"I left it on my desk. This morning I took it into the studio, and when the moment arrived, I gave it to the actor who took it to Miss Morton."

"Was he out of your sight, after you gave him the telegram?"

"No. He took it and walked right on the scene."

"Then he couldn't have substituted another for it?"

"No. It would have been impossible, unless he used sleight of hand."

"Before you gave the man the telegram where was it?"

"In my coat pocket."

"No chance, I suppose, of anyone having taken it out and substituting another."

"None."

"Then it is clear that the substitution must have been effected between the time you left your office last night, and your arrival here this morning."

"Yes."

"Was this possible?"

"Undoubtedly. I left my office last night about six. It is never locked. The caretakers, the women who clean the offices, were in there later, and from seven to nine this morning it would also have been a simple matter for anyone to enter and make the change."

Duvall turned to Mr. Baker.

"It's the same story," he said. "Someone who works in the building is responsible for this thing, or else is able to bribe one or more of your employees to act for them. But we won't get very far looking for the guilty person, with several hundred people to watch and no clues whatever to go on. Suppose we go back to your office, and I will tell you what I had in mind about this evening."

"Is Miss Morton able to go on with the scene?" Baker asked, as Edwards started away.

"No. She seems all broken up. I don't think she is very well. Her mother is going to take her home, as soon as she feels better."

"Will you ask Mrs. Morton to wait a little while, Mr. Edwards? Tell her that Mr. Duvall will join her presently, and go back to the city with her."

Mr. Edwards nodded, and withdrew, and Duvall and Mr. Baker retired to the latter's private office.

"What did you have in mind about that new film we're going to release to-night?" Mr. Baker asked.

"I'll explain that presently. First, tell me how long it will take you to make a short section of film, say enough to show for about ten seconds?"

"Oh—not long. But what of?"

"I'll explain that presently. But you could make such a section of film, develop and print it, and insert it in the picture you are going to show to-night, if you had to, couldn't you?"

"Yes—if we had to. But what's the idea?"

Duvall took a bit of paper from his pocket and handed it to Baker.

"I want you to make a picture of this, and have it inserted in the film at any convenient point—say at the beginning of the second part. And you had better have the cutting and pasting-in done by some trusted person, under your personal supervision."

"But," said Baker, gazing in amazement at the bit of paper Duvall had handed him. "What's the idea of putting this in our picture? It wouldn't do at all."

"Look at that telegram Mr. Edwards just gave

you. The writer says in it, 'I shall be there.' Now if the person who is causing all this trouble is going to be in the audience at the Grand Theater to-night, it is our business to find her. I say her, because I am convinced the guilty person is a woman."

A look of comprehension began to dawn upon Mr. Baker's face.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "You figure out that this will cause her to disclose herself—make some sign?"

"I feel certain of it."

"Then we will put it in." He laid the square of paper on his desk. "I will have the section of film made privately, and at once. I shall not tell even the other officers of the company about it. I suppose they will give me the devil, until after they know the reasons for it, but then, of course, it will be all right."

Duvall rose and put out his hand.

"You will be there to-night, of course?"

"Of course. And you?"

"Oh, I'll be on hand all right, although you may not recognize me. Good day." With a quick handshake he left the room, and went to look for Ruth and her mother.

He found them in the girl's dressing-room, ready to depart. Ruth was pale and terrified, showing the most intense nervousness in every word and movement. Mrs. Morton, scarcely less affected, strove with all her power to remain calm, in order that her daughter might not break down completely. Duvall did his best to cheer them up.

"You must not let this thing prey on your mind, Miss Morton," he said. "We are going to put a stop to it, and that very soon."

"I hope so, Mr. Duvall," the girl replied. "If you don't, I'm afraid I shall break down completely."

"I think we had better go home at once," Mrs. Morton said. "Ruth is in no condition to do any more work to-day."

"I quite agree with you about going, Mrs. Morton, but not home." He lowered his voice, as though fearing that even at that moment some tool of the woman who was sending the letters might be within earshot. "I suggest that you let me take your daughter to some quiet hotel. You can follow, with her maid and the necessary baggage, later on. But we must be certain to make the change in such a way that our enemies, who are undoubtedly

watching us, will not know of it. We will all leave here in your car, giving out that we are going to your home. No one will suspect anything to the contrary. On our arrival in the city, your daughter and I will leave the car, and drive to the hotel in a taxicab. When, later on, you follow with the baggage, take a taxi, sending your own car to the garage. I know your confidence in your chauffeur, but in this affair we can afford to trust no one. Your daughter and yourself can remain quietly in the hotel, under an assumed name, for a few days, until she recovers her strength. Meanwhile, I have every expectation that the persons at the bottom of this shameful affair will have been caught."

The plan appealed to Mrs. Morton at once, and she told the detective so.

"But where shall we go to—what hotel?" she asked.

Duvall leaned over and whispered in her ear the name of an exclusive and very quiet hotel in the upper part of the city.

"Do not mention the name to anyone," he said, "not even to the taxicab driver, when you leave the house. Tell him to put you down at the corner, a block away, and do not proceed to the hotel until

you see that he has driven off. And keep your eyes on your maid. I do not suspect her, I admit, but there seems to be a leak somewhere, and we must stop it."

Mrs. Morton nodded, and rose.

"We had better start, then," she said. "I understand perfectly. Have Ruth register in the name of Bradley. And I think, Mr. Duvall, if you can do so, you had better arrange to stop there as well."

"I had intended to do so," the detective replied.

"That will be better." Mrs. Morton led the way to the street.

"You did not intend to go to the showing of your new film at the Grand to-night, did you?" Duvall asked Ruth, after they had had started away from the studio.

"Yes, I had intended to go," she replied. "I always go to my first releases. But to-night I do not feel able to do so."

"I think it is just as well. What you need most now is rest."

The girl looked at herself in a small mirror affixed to the side of the car.

"Oh," she exclaimed. "I look terrible. These people are right, it seems. Three more weeks of

this persecution and my looks would be quite gone. Mr. Edwards told me only this morning that he had never seen me look so bad." There were tears in her eyes.

Duvall realized that she spoke the truth. The effect of the strain upon her nervous system, the brutal shocks of the past two days, the horror of the experience of the night before, had wrought havoc with the girl's beauty. Her face, gray, lined, haggard, her eyes, heavy and drawn, made her the very opposite of the radiant creature that had created such a furore in motion picture circles. The methods of her persecutors, if unchecked, would beyond doubt wreck her strength and health in a short time, and in addition, there was the danger that at any moment a physical attack, a swiftly thrown acid bomb, an explosive mixture concealed in an innocent-looking package, might destroy both her beauty and her reason in one blinding flash. With the fear in her great brown eyes constantly before him, Duvall determined more than ever to free her from this terrible persecution.

They separated in the neighborhood of 30th Street, Duvall and Miss Morton taking a taxicab that stood before one of the smaller Fifth Avenue

hotels. He made a pretense of entering the hotel, and did not summon the taxi until Mrs. Morton's car was well out of sight up the Avenue. Then he instructed the driver to proceed first to his hotel.

Their stop here was but momentary. Duvall went to his room, threw a few articles of clothing into his grip, left a note for Grace, telling her that he would be absent for several days, then rejoined his companion and drove uptown to the hotel opposite the park, the name of which he had mentioned to Mrs. Morton. He felt perfectly certain that they had not been followed.

Upon arriving at the hotel, he entered their names, including that of Mrs. Morton, upon the register, using the pseudonym which that latter had suggested. Then, sending Ruth to her room, he asked to see the manager, and had a brief conference with him in private. Immediately thereafter, he went up to his own apartment.

As he had arranged, it adjoined the suite selected for the Mortons. He tapped lightly on the communicating door.

"Are you all right, Miss Morton?" he called.

"Yes," came the girl's voice from the opposite side. "All right, thank you."

CHAPTER IX

GRACE DUVALL said good-by to her husband that morning with very little enthusiasm. She was not jealous of him, she was too sensible a woman, and trusted him too fully for that. But his sudden interest in Ruth Morton, the charming motion picture star, seemed rather incomprehensible to her. Of course she suspected he was working on a case which concerned the girl although Duvall had neither affirmed nor denied it. But she felt lonely, and perhaps a trifle out of sorts, and found her solitary breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, a little trying. So often before, she and Richard had worked together. Why, she wondered, did he so pointedly exclude her from this case? She would have liked to talk it over with him.

She sat rather disconsolately in her room most of the forenoon, and about one o'clock made ready for a lonely luncheon. She was just about to leave the apartment when the telephone bell rang. Grace hastened to it at once, hoping that the call might be from her husband.

A woman's voice, low, firm, determined sounded in her ears.

"I want to speak with Mr. Duvall," the voice said.

"Mr. Duvall is out. This is Mrs. Duvall."

"Very well, Mrs. Duvall. If you want to keep your husband from very serious harm, you had better tell him to steer clear of Ruth Morton's affairs in future. A word to the wise, you know. Good day." The speaker suddenly rang off.

Grace turned from the telephone, her brain in a whirl. What danger threatened her husband? Ought she not to tell him of the message as soon as possible, so that he might be on his guard? And what did this mysterious reference to "Ruth Morton's affairs" mean. Did it imply that Richard was in any way involved—but that was preposterous. She put the thought from her mind, and went down in the elevator to a lonely and not very enjoyable meal.

As she left the dining-room, and passed through the lobby, she thought she saw ahead of her a familiar figure. A moment later she realized that it was Richard himself, walking very rapidly toward the main entrance, his satchel in his hand. Was he

leaving the hotel? And if so, ought she not to make an attempt to give him the message she had just received, before he did so? She walked quickly after him, but his pace was so rapid that she reached the sidewalk only in time to see him swing himself into a waiting taxi, baggage in hand, and drive quickly off. But what Grace saw, in addition to this, filled her with queer misgivings. Beside her husband in the cab was a woman— very beautiful woman, whom Grace had no difficulty whatever in identifying as Ruth Morton. And she also noticed, in the brief moment that elapsed before the taxi shot toward the Avenue, that the woman seemed to be in tears, and that Richard leaned over with the utmost solicitude and affection and clasped her hand in his. For the first time in her life, Grace Duvall was actually jealous.

Thoughts of possible danger to her husband, however, were paramount in her mind. Without an instant's hesitation she stepped into a second taxi, whose driver was trying to attract her attention, and told him to follow the car containing the man and woman which had just driven off.

The chauffeur grinned knowingly, nodded, and started his car. His grin drove from Grace's mind

her sudden and unaccustomed jealousy. She knew that Richard must be going away with this girl for some reason connected with his professional work. Of course that work did not usually include consoling beautiful damsels in distress, but there must be extenuating circumstances. She put her unpleasant thoughts from her mind, and proceeded on her mission, to give her husband the warning message she had just received, with a reasonably calm mind.

After a drive of some fifteen minutes, she saw the cab ahead of them begin to slow up, and observed that her chauffeur did likewise. Presently the first cab stopped before the doors of a big, imposing looking hotel, and Richard and Miss Morton hurriedly entered.

Grace did not at once get out. She knew that her husband might resent her having followed him, and did not care to put him to any disadvantage by appearing so unexpectedly upon the scene. She waited, therefore, for several minutes, until he would have had time to go to his room, and then, paying off her cabman, she strolled quietly into the hotel lobby.

There were a few persons sitting about, but

Richard was not amongst them. Going to the clerk at the desk, she asked to see Mr. Richard Duvall.

The clerk regarded her with a supercilious stare, consulted his records in a bored way, then informed her that no such person was registered there.

Grace was completely taken aback.

"But I saw him come in, only a few moments ago," she protested.

"No such person here, Miss." With a frigid smile the clerk turned away, watching her, however, out of the corner of his eye, as though he considered her a suspicious character.

Grace leaned over and examined the register. There were three entries upon it, in a handwriting clearly that of her husband. "Mrs. Bradley and maid" the first entry said. "Miss Bradley," the second. They had been assigned a suite of rooms. The third and last entry was "John Bradley." His room adjoined the suite. All three were set down as hailing from Boston.

Grace puzzled for a long time over this mysterious series of entries without arriving at any definite conclusion regarding them. Where was the so-called Mrs. Bradley? And why had her husband assumed the same name? Was he posing as Ruth

Morton's brother, and if so, for what reason? She could not make head or tail of the matter, and wondered whether she had better send up her card, or write Richard a note and leave it for him, telling of the warning. While she was debating the matter in her mind, she suddenly saw him emerge from one of the elevators at the opposite side of the lobby, and come toward the desk.

Grace approached him at once, glad that the matter had been so simply arranged.

"Richard," she said, in a low voice. "I want to speak to you."

The gentleman she had addressed regarded her with a frown.

"My name is not Richard, madam," he said, pointedly. "I am John Bradley. You must have made a mistake." With a polite bow he passed no.

Grace was completely taken aback. She knew that between them there existed a tacit understanding never to address each other, in public, during the progress of a case, unless requested to do so by some sign. But she felt that she had important information to give her husband, and then, she *had* been a trifle jealous and annoyed. The thought

that she had committed an error filled her with chagrin. Without a word, she left the hotel.

At a nearby corner she stepped into a telephone booth, and calling up the hotel, asked to speak to Mr. John Bradley. In a few moments she heard Richard's familiar tones.

"This is Grace," she said quickly. "I'm sorry I spoke to you, just now, but I wanted to tell you that some woman telephoned the hotel to-day, and left a warning to the effect that if you did not keep out of Miss Morton's affairs, you would be in serious danger."

"How did you know where I was?" Duvall asked.

"I saw you leave the hotel, and followed you."

"You should not have done so."

"But I wanted to give you the message. I thought you ought to know."

"I understand that, but I wished my presence here to be unknown to anyone. You made a serious mistake. I only hope that no harm will come of it."

"But—how could harm come of it?"

"You drove here in one of the hotel's regular cabs, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Then the people I am trying to avoid may trace me here, through the driver of that cab."

"Oh—Richard—I'm so sorry. Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Nothing, now, except to make no further attempt to communicate with me here. Good-by."

Grace returned to her hotel, very thoroughly dissatisfied with what she had done. It seemed to her that by trying to warn Richard of possible danger, she might only have brought it upon him. Apparently he had left their hotel, to avoid the very persons who had telephoned the warning message to her. She arrived at the door, got out of the cab in which she had made the journey, and looked about, hoping that the cabman who had driven her uptown might now be at his usual stand. To her delight, she saw that he was.

She went up to the man, a slim, keen looking young Irishman, and engaged him in conversation.

"Do you remember driving me uptown an hour or so ago?" she asked.

"Sure I do, Miss," answered the man, touching his cap.

"Then please forget completely where you went, will you?" She handed the man a ten dollar bill.

"It is barely possible that someone may try to find out, through you, where I went. Be sure that you give them no information."

"They'll get nothing out of me, Miss," the man replied, pocketing the bill with a pleased grin.

"And if anybody *does* try to find out, get their name, if you can, and if not, a description of them."

"I'll do my best, Miss."

"I am stopping here. My name is Duvall, Mrs. Duvall."

"Very good, ma'am. I'll attend to it, ma'am."

Grace went up to her room, satisfied that she had remedied her mistake, and began to look through an afternoon paper she had bought. There seemed nothing better to do, during the evening, than to go to the theater. Glancing down the list of attractions, she suddenly saw the name of Ruth Morton, in large letters, billed in a new feature play, *An American Beauty,* opening at the Grand Theater that night. She at once made up her mind to go. Since yesterday, her interest in Miss Morton had perceptibly increased. And in spite of all, Richard *had* held her hand.

She was just finishing her dinner, when a page

came through the room, calling her name. She got up at once and followed him to the lobby.

"I am Mrs. Duvall," she said.

The boy looked up.

"There's a chauffeur outside wants to see you, ma'am," he said, "Tom Leary."

Grace understood at once, and made her way to the sidewalk. The cab driver of the morning stood near the entrance.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, for calling you out," he said, "but I couldn't come in, and there was something I felt you ought to know."

"What is it?"

"A lady came here to see me a while ago," he said. "A smallish looking woman, not pretty, with light hair. She had on a dark brown suit. Not very good style, ma'am. She asked me if I knew anybody in the hotel named Duvall. I said I did. I find she'd been asking all the other cabmen, and had been to the desk, before that. I guess she must have been inquiring for your husband, ma'am."

"Yes—yes—very likely," Grace hastily replied. "What then?"

"Well, ma'am, she then asked me if I knew Mrs. Duvall. I said I did. Then she wanted to know

if I'd driven either you or your husband to any other hotel to-day, and I said I hadn't, but that I usually did drive you, when you went anywhere. I took the liberty of saying that, ma'am."

"Yes. I'm glad you did. Go on."

"Then she hands me five dollars, and says that if I *did* drive you to any other hotel, I was to let her know which one it was."

"Where?" Grace asked, eagerly.

The man fished from his pocket a small bit of cardboard upon which was scrawled with a pencil "Alice Watson, General Delivery."

Grace stared at the bit of paper in surprise. Had she, by some lucky chance, discovered the very person for whom Richard was seeking? Of course the name was probably a fictitious one, and the address "General Delivery," meant nothing, and yet, it provided a clew by means of which this woman might be found.

"You have acted very wisely, Leary," she said. "I am greatly obliged to you."

"Do you want me to send her any word, ma'am?"

"I may. I am anxious to get hold of this woman, or, to be more exact, my husband is. I will consult with him first, however. It may be that he

will want you to write her a letter, giving her some such information as she desires, and then, by going to the general delivery window at the post office and watching, identify her when she comes for it. Do you think you could arrange to get off and do this?"

"Well, ma'am, even if I can't arrange to get off, you could of course hire my cab, and——"

"Of course," Grace interrupted. "Very well. I will let you know further about the matter a little later. Meanwhile, here is something more for your trouble." She gave the man another bill. "Now drive me to the Grand Theater."

CHAPTER X

DUVALL, after having satisfied himself that Ruth Morton was safely installed in her suite of rooms at the hotel, came down to the lobby to await the arrival of Mrs. Morton.

The unexpected meeting with Grace caused him the utmost anxiety. He appreciated fully her reasons for having come to see him, and yet he deeply regretted her coming. The enemies of Ruth Morton were far too clever, too shrewd, he feared, not to take advantage of her mistake, and by means of it, trace him at once to his present address. A complete disguise became an immediate necessity. He decided to assume one, as soon as Mrs. Morton had arrived.

The latter came in about ten minutes later accompanied by Nora. Duvall explained matters to the clerk at the desk, and the supposed Mrs. Bradley was conducted to her rooms at once. Duvall accompanied her.

They found Ruth resting quietly, but her joy at

her mother's arrival was very apparent. She feared to be left alone, and seemed to expect her persecutors to appear from every closet, through every door or window.

"Oh, mother, I'm so glad to see you," she exclaimed.

"I'm glad to find you safe," Mrs. Morton returned.

"I advise you to stay right here with your daughter throughout the evening, Mrs. Morton," said Duvall, as he made ready to go to his own room. "Have your meals sent up. Admit no one. Open no packages. I have every hope that before the night is over, I may have some most important and satisfactory news for you. I shall probably not see you again until after the performance to-night, but if anything vital occurs, I will of course communicate with you by telephone. Good-by, and good luck."

When he reached his own room, he proceeded to the business of divesting himself completely of all resemblance to Richard Duvall. It was clear that the persons he was seeking knew him by sight, and hence his opportunities to accomplish anything against them were very greatly lessened. The

threatening telephone message received by Grace did not worry him at all, but the fact that those people were so constantly upon his heels did. He determined to disappear completely as Duvall, and reappear in the person of John Bradley, using all his skill in the matter of disguise to create for himself a totally different personality.

Taking a makeup box from his grip, he proceeded first to give his dark brown hair a very decided and natural looking touch of gray, over the temples and at the sides. Then he fitted into place a short pointed grayish beard, and a mustache with waxed ends. These were products of the skill of one of the best wig-makers in Paris, and so cleverly made that they would defy detection, even in broad daylight. A pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses completed the facial disguise. Duvall might now have passed anywhere for a well-groomed professional man of fifty-five or sixty.

The impression was heightened by his frock coat and silk hat. He felt quite sure that, in his present disguise, the plotters against Ruth Morton's welfare could not possibly recognize him.

He went down to the theater very early, after a hasty dinner, and found Mr. Baker in the box office.

The moving picture man did not recognize him, of course, and Duvall, after drawing him aside, had some little difficulty in convincing him of his identity. Once it had been established, however, Mr. Baker conducted him to a dressing room behind the scenes, and motioned him to a chair.

"We can talk here without being seen or heard," he said. "Is there anything new?"

"Nothing. I have taken Mrs. Morton and her daughter to a hotel, where I feel sure they will be quite safe from further annoyance. Ruth will not come to the studio for a few days, until we have gotten to the bottom of this affair. I am staying in an adjoining room, so as to be on hand at once in case of any trouble. I suppose you have everything fixed for to-night?"

"Yes." Mr. Baker's tone was dubious. "I have inserted in the film the material you gave me. It will appear just at the end of Part I. I hope it will not spoil our picture."

"I think not. As a matter of fact, when the reasons for its introduction become known, I imagine it will give you a lot of very valuable advertising."

"Possibly so," Mr. Baker granted. "But after all, I begin to feel very doubtful as to the results.

This woman, whoever she is, that is persecuting Miss Morton seems to be mighty clever. She may not be affected in the way you think, by what she sees on the screen."

"I realize that. It is only a chance. But don't you think that, under the circumstances, it is a chance worth taking?"

"Most certainly; otherwise I should not have consented to it. But, as I say, I doubt very much its success."

"Well—we can only try. You will remember what I said about the lights, and the call for a doctor, if one appears to be needed."

"Yes. I have all that in mind. Miss Morton is not coming to-night, I presume."

"No. I advised against it."

"I'm glad of that."

Duvall sat in silence for a moment.

"By the way," he said presently. "There is one important matter that I have overlooked. Do you give your employees passes for these opening performances?"

"No—not regularly, that is. But any member of our organization who wishes to see the performance would of course be admitted. We reserve a

section of the house for that purpose. A number of our people usually come over."

"Good! That's just what I had hoped for. Where is this section?"

"The last five rows on the left-hand side of the house. But why?"

"Don't you see? All the evidence points to the fact that the person who is responsible for these threats either works in your studio, or is in some way able to gain access to it at any time. Witness the stolen photograph—the substituted telegram of this morning. In the latter it was definitely stated that the woman in the case would be in the audience to-night. I am hoping sincerely that she will not have the cleverness to enter as one of the public, but will come in as one of your people, and sit in the section of the house reserved exclusively for your employees. In that event, I think we shall discover who she is beyond a doubt."

"I certainly hope so," sighed Mr. Baker. "This thing has got us all up in the air. Our President had a long conference with me this afternoon about Miss Morton. He seems to think she is going to pieces, and recommended trying to get Joan Clayton away from the Multigraph people to take her place.

He says that she is losing her good looks. I told him nothing, of course, but it worried me a lot. I am very fond of Ruth Morton, and I don't want to see her lose her place."

"She won't lose it," asserted Duvall. "When we get through, her position with your company will be stronger than it has ever been before. Shall we go out in the lobby and take a look at the crowd as it comes in?"

Mr. Baker assented, and the two men stationed themselves near the box office.

Without appearing to do so, Duvall inspected the various members of the incoming crowd. His scrutiny was careful, comprehensive, but the only person he recognized was Grace.

That she also recognized him he knew. She had seen the disguise he wore, many times, and was familiar with it. She did not betray herself, however, by so much as a glance, but proceeded at once to her seat.

When the moment arrived for the beginning of the performance, the house was filled. Duvall, with Baker at his side, stationed himself back of the left-hand section of seats, so that the rows reserved for the employees of the company were directly in

front of him. He occupied himself, during the interval before the lights were switched off, by noting carefully all the women in the last five rows, but none of them attracted his attention particularly.

Soon the performance began. Ruth Morton, the American Beauty, stepped upon the screen, a compelling vision of loveliness. The audience followed eagerly her exciting adventures. Duvall himself, in spite of his preoccupation, found himself absorbed by the charm and action of the picture. In the opening scenes, Ruth appeared as a poor girl, trying to make her way in the great world of the theater. Her struggles, her sacrifices, her failures, were almost vividly portrayed. When at last, through her marvelous beauty, she succeeded in gaining recognition from the critics, he applauded with those about him, completely under the spell of her charm.

The final scene of the first part was a view of Ruth, as Catherine Grey, the American Beauty, refusing the dubious offers made her by a rich New Yorker. With a faith in herself by no means assumed, Catherine turned from his picture of luxury, of steam yachts, of country estates, of unlimited bank accounts, with a smile which showed her confidence in her beauty, her talents. The audience

watched her, spellbound, as she stood on the sidewalk before the theater, looking with grave inscrutable eyes after the costly limousine that had just driven away without her. In no picture heretofore taken of the girl had she appeared to better advantage. Every line of her lovely face seemed responsive to the effect of the lighting, the situation, the motives which inspired her. The audience drew itself back, ready to register its approval of the first part of the film with hearty applause.

And then, something happened. The lovely, smiling face of Ruth Morton faded from view, and in its place came with brutal suddenness the picture of a huge grinning death's head, amazing in its suggestion of horror. The audience sat in utter silence, wondering what could be the reason for this sudden apparition. Beneath the death's head appeared in huge letters the words:

"We know the woman."

The thing had come as a complete surprise. The tension throughout the house was electric. Duvall saw his wife rise from her seat on the aisle, a few rows away, and come quickly to the rear of the

house. She, at least, realized that a moment of importance had arrived.

And then, without warning, the stillness of the theater was broken by a sudden cry, and a woman, sitting some three rows from where Duvall stood, but on the opposite side of the aisle from the seats indicated by Mr. Baker, rose to her feet, turned, and fell heavily against the back of the seat ahead of her. At almost the same moment the lights were switched on, and a voice was heard calling. "Is there a doctor in the house?"

It was Mr. Baker, and Duvall, who stood beside him, sprang forward at once.

"I am a doctor," he cried, and approached the place where the woman sat.

"Can I be of any assistance?" Grace asked. "I am a trained nurse."

"Yes," replied Duvall, quickly. "Get this woman to the ladies' dressing room at once."

Grace sprang forward. There was a bustle among the audience, a sudden rising, a craning of necks. Everyone seemed to be looking for the person who had uttered the sudden cry. Before anyone fully realized what had happened, Grace had reached the fainting woman's side, and supporting

her with an arm about her waist, was leading her toward the rear of the house.

Almost at once the theater became dark, and the second part of the picture was flashed upon the screen. The lovely face of Ruth Morton once more greeted the eyes of the audience The interruption had occupied less than a minute.

Duvall, standing at the entrance to the aisle, watched Grace come quickly toward him, supporting the fainting woman. The latter seemed completely overcome, and Grace was obliged almost to carry her.

"Keep her there, in the dressing room, until I return," he said in a quick whisper. Then with a nod to Mr. Baker, who stood close by, he went toward the street. A taxicab drew up, awaiting a fare. Duvall signaled to it.

"Wait for me here," he said to the driver. "I will be back in a moment." Then he re-entered the theater.

Grace meanwhile had conducted the woman to the ladies' dressing room, and placed her upon a couch.

She was a frail, insignificant looking creature, not at all the sort of person one would associate with threats of the kind that Ruth Morton had been

receiving. She appeared to be greatly ashamed of her sudden collapse, and kept insisting, in spite of her evident weakness, that she was quite all right again, and wanted to go.

Grace, however, paid no attention to her protestations, but insisted that she remain quiet.

"The doctor will be here in a moment," she said. "You must wait quietly until he comes."

The woman, however, seemed determined to leave, and it was with a sigh of relief that Grace welcomed her husband's return.

Duvall came in hurriedly, as he did so taking a small brown bottle from his waistcoat pocket.

"Get me a glass of water," he said to the negro maid. The woman brought one at once.

Duvall took a tablet from the bottle and placed it in the glass, stirring the water about with the end of a leadpencil until the tablet was dissolved. Then he went up to the woman on the couch.

"Here—drink this," he commanded. "It will quiet your nerves."

The woman took the glass, her eyes regarding him with suspicion. Duvall, in his character of a physician, turned aside, and addressed a few words to Grace, fearing that in some way the woman

might succeed in recognizing him. As a result both failed to see that instead of drinking the medicine he had given to her, the girl swiftly poured it upon the floor. When he again turned to her, she held the empty glass in her hand.

Duvall took it from her, and handed it to Grace.

"Come with me, Miss," he said. "I will see you home."

"It isn't necessary," the woman gasped. "I—I'm all right now."

"You have had a severe shock, Miss. As a physician, it is my duty to see that you arrive home safely. I have already engaged a cab. Come." He took the woman by the arm and in spite of her objections, raised her from the couch.

Suddenly her opposition vanished. She seemed glad of his assistance, and, leaning on his arm, made her way from the theater. Duvall was in high spirits. He fully believed that his plan had succeeded, that the woman at his side was the one who was responsible for the threats which had made Ruth Morton so wretched for the past few days.

The cab that he had engaged stood waiting at the door. He put the woman inside. She seemed very weak and helpless.

"Drive to the —— Hotel," Duvall called to the chauffeur, then entered the cab and seated himself at the woman's side. He saw Mr. Baker standing upon the sidewalk, and nodded. Then they drove off.

The woman lay, in a state of apparent collapse, in one corner of the cab, her face pale, her eyes closed. Duvall, inspecting her as well as he could in the faint light, began to feel grave doubts as to whether after all he had been successful in his ruse. She seemed so little the type of woman he would have associated with the brutal campaign of terror that had been directed against Miss Morton.

She clutched a black leather satchel tightly in one hand. Duvall regarded it with interest. If he was right in his assumption that this was the woman he sought, it seemed highly probable that within that satchel lay evidence that might convict her. At least there would be some clue as to who she was, and that in itself would be valuable.

The woman seemed to grow weaker and weaker. Her closed eyes, her slow but regular breathing, indicated that the drug he had given her had begun to take effect. Stealthily Duvall's hand reached toward the small black satchel. With eager fingers

he pressed the catch, and as the bag opened, began to draw out its contents.

The woman, however, seemed far less helpless than he had supposed. She pulled the satchel toward her, her fingers seeking to close it. Duvall discontinued his efforts at once. It would be time enough, he felt, when they had reached the hotel, and the woman had been safely conducted to a room there. He had made his plans carefully in advance, and arranged matters with the hotel manager. There was nothing to do, now, but wait.

Presently the woman, who had been regarding him, unnoticed, from beneath lowered lids, uttered a groan, as though in great pain, and clutched her breast. Duvall turned to her at once, speaking in a soothing voice, and assuming a professional manner.

"Is anything wrong, Miss? I had hoped you were feeling better."

"No, doctor. I'm not. I feel terrible—terrible."

"In what way?"

"My—my heart. It is in awful shape. I need some stimulant. The—the medicine you gave me made me feel very ill."

Her words surprised Duvall. He had given her

a simple drug, the effect of which should have been to make her drowsy, to quiet her nerves. That she had not taken it, he of course did not know. His greatest fear had been that she would refuse to enter the cab with him. Now that she had done so, he was prepared to use even force, if necessary, to retain her in his custody until he had either obtained the evidence he desired, or forced from her a confession. What he particularly hoped to find was the seal with which the death's head impression had been made. He felt certain that, if this was the woman he sought, she would have this seal somewhere about her person. It was far too significant a bit of evidence to be left lying about at home.

But there was always the chance that this woman, who had been so instantly affected by the ghastly apparition on the screen, the significant words beneath it, might not, after all, be the right one, the one he sought. There was always the possibility that the real criminal, although present in the audience, had made no sign, and that his companion in the cab might be entirely innocent. As he had told Baker, it was a chance—a long chance, yet something seemed to say to him that he had made no mistake in taking it.

Now, however, a new situation had arisen to upset his plans. His prisoner, instead of having been quieted by the drug he had administered, was apparently becoming more and more agitated and nervous every minute. Her groans, as she lay huddled up in the corner of the cab, puzzled him, filled him with vague alarm. Was it possible that she had a weak heart? Had the sedative he had given her, harmless as he knew the dose would be to a normal person, affected her in so unfavorable a way? He took her wrist in his hand, and felt her pulse. It was quick, indicative of nervous excitement, but certainly not weak.

"Oh—doctor, doctor, won't you *please* give me something to make me feel a little better?" the woman gasped. "It's my heart, I tell you. I—I can't breathe. I'm suffocating. I must have something at once—some aromatic spirits of ammonia —some brandy—anything, to make me feel a little better."

Her earnestness, her trembling voice, her excited manner, all served to convince Duvall that his companion was really in need of a stimulant of some sort. He decided to humor her. A dose of aromatic spirits, he reflected, could do no harm, and would

doubtless serve to lessen her excitement. He leaned out, and directed the driver of the cab to stop at the nearest drug store.

"Oh—thank you—thank you," the woman gasped. "Tell him to hurry, please." Then collapsing in the corner of the seat, she closed her eyes and sat so silent that Duvall began to wonder whether she had lost consciousness.

The taxicab, meanwhile, had drawn up in front of a drug store on Sixth Avenue. Duvall took a look at the apparently unconscious woman, then spoke quickly to the chauffeur.

"Stay here until I return," he said. "Don't go away under any circumstances. I shall be gone but a moment."

The man nodded.

"I'll stay, sir," he said. "Don't worry."

Duvall went quickly into the store. Going up to the soda counter, he instructed the clerk to prepare him a dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia as quickly as possible. While waiting for it, he watched the cab through the store window.

The preparation of the dose required but a few moments. Then, explaining matters to the clerk, Duvall took the glass in his hand and went back

to the cab. He smiled to himself at his anxiety, as he passed through the door. The woman was far too ill, he reflected, to entertain any thoughts of escape.

"Here," the detective said, opening the door of the cab. "Drink this."

There was no response. Duvall stuck his head into the vehicle with some misgivings. Then he experienced a sudden and most mortifying shock. There was no fainting woman huddled against the cushions in the far corner. There was no woman at all. *The cab was empty!*

CHAPTER XI

RICHARD DUVALL had had charge of many unusual and intricate cases, in the past, and he prided himself upon the fact that he had handled them with skill and discretion, and that the results which had followed had been both quick and decisive. But in all his career he had not, so far as he could remember, ever felt quite so chagrined, as he did when he threw open the door of the cab and found that the woman he had left there had disappeared.

The fault was his, he knew that well—entirely and unmistakably his. This woman was evidently far more clever, more subtle than he had imagined. He realized now that she had in all probability not taken the drug he had given her in the dressing room of the theater, that she had seen his effort to examine the contents of her handbag, that her weakness, her call for a stimulant of some sort had been but clever acting, and that she had purposely sent him into the drug store in order that she might

escape. He blamed himself, utterly and completely, for his amazing stupidity in not realizing that the woman, instead of ordering the cabman to drive away, had only to slip out through the door on the opposite side of the vehicle, and vanish in the darkness.

And this she had quite evidently done. The door of the cab opposite him stood open. No doubt she had purposely refrained from closing it, fearing that the click of the lock might attract the driver's attention. The latter with his eyes following Duvall, as the detective entered the store, had remained serenely unconscious of his passenger's movements, her clever escape.

At least three or four minutes had elapsed. Duvall glanced up and down the street, but no sight of the vanished woman greeted his anxious gaze. She had had ample time to reach the next corner, and disappear in the darkness. Thoughts of pursuit entered his mind, but he realized at once the fruitlessness of such an attempt. His captive might have fled east or west, at either of the streets north or south of where he stood. Or she might have entered some restaurant, some motion picture house, or other convenient doorway along the Ave-

nue. She might even have boarded a Sixth Avenue car, or hailed a passing cab. He looked up at the chauffeur, who still sat at his steering wheel, totally unaware of the flight of one of his passengers.

"The woman has gone," Duvall exclaimed, nodding toward the vacant cab.

The man turned in complete surprise. He seemed scarcely able to credit the evidence of his senses.

"I—why sir—she was here just a moment ago, sir," he gasped, gazing into the interior of the cab as though he expected its recent occupant to suddenly materialize in the flesh.

"She got out on the other side, while I was in the store," Duvall remarked, shortly, then taking an electric searchlight from his pocket, made a thorough examination of the interior of the cab. He scarcely expected to find anything, although it flashed through his mind that the woman, in her hurry to escape, might have left her bag, her gloves, or something that might afford him a clue to her identity.

At first he saw nothing. Then, as his eyes became more accustomed to the brilliant glare of the electric torch, he observed a bit of white cardboard lying on the floor. It looked like a visiting card,

and he snatched it up, devoutly hoping that it had fallen from the woman's bag during the attempt he had made to rifle it.

Under the light of his pocket lamp he made a quick examination of his find. It proved a lamentable disappointment. It was in fact a visiting card, or to be more correct, the torn half of one, but what was engraved upon it afforded him not the least clue to either the identity or the address of the woman he sought. On the first line were the words, "Miss Mar"—then came the torn edge of the card. On the second line there was but the figure 1, and then the break.

Was the name so tantalizingly suggested by the letters before him "Miss Mary" something or other? Or "Miss Margaret?" Or was it "Miss Martin," or "Miss Marvin," or "Miss Marbury," or any one of a score of other names beginning with the letters "Mar?" And what was the missing address? What numbers followed the figure 1, on that part of the card that had been torn off? And what was the name of the street? He realized at once that while what he had found might, under certain circumstances, act as a suggestion, it would not serve to get him very far, unless reinforced by other and

more definite evidence. He thought for a moment of securing from Mr. Baker a list of the women employees of the studio. It was true, he remembered, that his prisoner had not been seated in that particular section of the house reserved for the company's employees, but that might have readily come from the fact that the section was fully occupied when she arrived. Then, as more names beginning with "Mar" occurred to him, the futility of the idea became apparent. Apart from any possible number of Marys, and Margarets there were Martha, Maria, Marcia, Marian, Marcella—others perhaps. Of course he would be able to recognize the woman, if he saw her, but she would be too clever to return to her place in the studio the following day, if by any chance she worked there, knowing, as she must inevitably know, that she would be identified at once.

Still, there was of course the chance that Mr. Baker might have recognized her. He presumably knew all the employees of his company by sight. Duvall got into the cab with a mortifying sense of having made a very foolish blunder, and directed the cabman to drive him back to the Grand Theater.

Mr. Baker was waiting in the lobby when the

detective arrived, and at a nod from the latter the two men retired to the dressing room in which they had had their previous consultation. The moving picture man's face was eager, expectant, as he waited for Duvall to speak, and the latter felt his chagrin increase by the moment.

When he had at last finished his account of the affair, Mr. Baker looked exceedingly grave.

"Too bad—too bad," he muttered, "to have had her in our hands like that, and then, to lose her."

"Did you ever see the woman before?" Duvall questioned.

"No. Of course she might be in our employ, but I doubt it, although I could not be expected to know by sight every girl who works in the plant. There are stenographers, film cutters and pasters, dozens of others, that I do not engage directly, and never see. Let me look at the card."

Duvall handed the torn bit of pasteboard to him.

"Not much to go on," he said, quietly.

"No. Not much."

"Of course," the detective went on, "the evening has not been entirely wasted. We know the woman by sight, and that is a great deal. As for her name, I have made a careful study of this card, and as-

suming it to have been of the usual length in comparison to its width, the name following the 'Miss,' if it was a first name, points to a very short one, such as Mary, and not a long one, such as Margaret."

"How do you make that out?"

"Simply enough. The entire name would of course have been placed in the center of the card, which was, it appears, torn almost exactly in half. On the left-hand side, which we have in our possession, there are, in the word 'Miss,' four letters, and in 'Mar' three, or seven in all. We should correspondingly expect to find seven letters on the right or missing half of the card. But were the first name Margaret, or Marcella, which each contain eight letters, or five to be added to the 'Mar' we already have, it would leave but two letters for the woman's last name, and names of that length, or rather shortness, are so rare as to be negligible. It is far more probable that we have but to add a 'y' to the 'Mar,' or one letter, leaving six for the last name. This would give us 'Miss Mar-y Gordon,' with the name evenly divided by the tear. Or, if by chance, the first name is such a one as Marian, containing six letters, we need add but the 'ian,'

or three letters, to the left-hand side of our card, leaving us four letters for the last name. Thus, Miss Marian Kent. The full name on the card should have just fourteen letters, provided the card is, as I conclude, torn exactly in half.

"Why do you conclude that?"

"Because visiting cards of this sort are usually made in standard sizes. I happen to have a woman's card—Miss Morton's, in fact, in my pocket. Its width is the same as that of the torn card, and if the latter was of the same length, you can readily see that it was torn exactly in half." He took a card from his wallet and laid the torn bit of pasteboard upon it. Their widths were identical. The whole card was just twice the length of the torn one.

"That is a most interesting deduction," Baker exclaimed. "What use can we make of it?"

"I will tell you. You have your car here, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Then I suggest that we run down to the studio at once, get your list of employees, examine the name of every woman upon it, and see if we cannot find one of fourteen letters, including the 'Miss,'

of which the first name begins with 'Mar.' The chances are that we will be able to locate the name immediately."

"Yes," Mr. Baker exclaimed, rising in some excitement, "but, as you have before said, the woman, if she works for us, will not dare to appear in the morning, for fear that she will be recognized at once."

"That is true, but you will no doubt have on your books her home address. If we hurry, we can get there and back by midnight, and we may be able to place our hands on the woman before she can have time to escape."

Mr. Baker reached the door in two steps.

"Come along," he said. "We'll burn up the roads."

The two men said little, during their long ride. When they reached the entrance to the dark and silent studio building, only the night watchman appeared to greet them.

Inside the building, however, there were more signs of life. Some stage carpenters were busy, working overtime on a piece of scenery. In the developing and drying departments were also signs of activity. Mr. Baker led the way to his office.

"It happens," he said, "that as I am obliged to O. K. the payroll each week, I have a list of our employees in my desk." As he spoke, he took his keys, opened a drawer, and drew out a small red book.

"Here is the list, with the home addresses," he said. "How shall we go to work?"

"Read me all the women's names, in which the first name begins with 'Mar,' Duvall said. I will put them down on a sheet of paper." He drew a pad toward him, took out his pencil, and the two set to work.

When they had at last reached the end of the book, both Duvall and Mr. Baker were surprised to find that the names they had picked out were so few. In all there were but eight, as follows:

Miss Mary Sollenberger,
Miss Mary Green,
Miss Margaret Schwartz,
Miss Maria Rosenheim,
Miss Martha Simmons,
Miss Marcia Ford,
Miss Marian Greenberg,
Miss Mary King.

Duvall ran his pencil down the list of names.

"There is but one that fulfills the requirements," he announced. "The sixth name, that of Miss Marcia Ford, contains in all fourteen letters. None of the others do. Two, those of Miss King and Miss Green, come the nearest. Miss King's full name contains twelve letters, Miss Green's, thirteen. Any one of the three *might* be the one we seek."

"I can answer for Miss King at once," said Mr. Baker, quietly. "She is my stenographer, and most certainly *not* the woman who was in the theater to-night."

"That leaves then, Miss Green and Miss Ford. What do they do, and what are their addresses?"

Mr. Baker referred to his book.

"Miss Green is a telephone operator. Her address is given here as 310 Gold Street, Brooklyn. Miss Ford is a film cutter, and lives at 122 West 9th Street, New York."

"Neither sounds particularly promising," Duvall remarked, with a frown.

"No. But of course we are assuming that the woman in question works in the studio. If she does *not*, our whole fabric falls to pieces."

Duvall took the torn piece of card from his pocket and glanced at it.

"The address given here begins with the number 1," he said, significantly. It may be that Miss Marcia Ford, of 122 West Ninth Street, is the woman we are looking for, although I confess I should have suspected some rival motion picture star, rather than a film cutter."

"By George, I forgot the fact that the card had an address on it," Baker exclaimed. "I think we had better look up Miss Ford at once."

"I agree with you," Duvall said. A few moments later they were driving at top speed back toward New York.

It was five minutes to twelve when they reached the corner of Fifth Avenue and Ninth Street and turned west. Duvall realized that they were following a very slim clue, but it seemed for the moment the only promising one they had.

The house, No. 122, proved to be a typical high stooped, brown-stone boarding house of this section of the city. It was for the most part dark, although one or two of the upper windows showed lights.

Accompanied by Baker, Duvall quickly mounted the steps and rang the bell. At first there was no

answer, although they could hear the sound of the bell tinkling mournfully inside. A second summons brought no greater response. At the third, a woman's head appeared in one of the upper windows, and they heard a shrill and not over pleasant voice asking them what they wanted.

"I have an important message for Miss Marcia Ford," Duvall replied pleasantly. "I must see her at once."

"Miss Ford moved away from here three months ago," the woman snapped.

"Will you please give me her present address?" the detective exclaimed, somewhat taken aback.

"I don't know it. She didn't say where she was going. Good night!" A moment later the window above them was closed with a slam.

The two men stood staring at each other in the utmost disappointment. They had expected a more favorable outcome of their expedition.

"How long has she been with you?" Duvall asked, turning to his companion.

"I don't know. Certainly over three months, or we shouldn't have this address on our books. I suppose, when she changed it, she omitted to notify us. What are we going to do now?"

"There isn't anything we can do, until morning. If Miss Marcia Ford reports for work to-morrow, and you see that she is the woman who fainted in the theater to-night, have her arrested at once. If she doesn't report for work, at least we shall know that she is the woman we are after."

"That isn't much consolation," Mr. Baker grumbled.

"I don't agree with you. Having the woman's name, knowing her appearance, we are certain to catch her, sooner or later. And in the meanwhile, I do not think that she will attempt anything further so far as Miss Morton is concerned. We are too close on her trail, for that."

"I hope you are right," said the motion picture man. "Well, I guess I'll go along home. I'll be at the studio first thing in the morning, however, and I suppose you will be there too."

"By all means. I am most curious to see whether our reasoning to-night has been correct."

"Shall I take you to your hotel in my car?"

"No, thanks. I'll take a taxi. Good night."

"Good night."

A few moments later, Duvall was speeding up Fifth Avenue, his brain still puzzling over the

curious contradictions which the events of the night had developed. On one point he felt secure, however. He was certain that the woman who had so narrowly escaped him earlier in the evening would not soon again attempt anything against Ruth Morton.

Arrived at his hotel, he asked for his key. The man behind the desk, with a queer look, handed him along with it a slip of paper. On it was written: "Mrs. Bradley wishes Mr. John Bradley to come to her room at the moment he returns."

"When was this message left?" the detective asked.

"Oh—nearly two hours ago. The time is stamped on the back of it, sir."

Duvall turned the card over, and saw from the stamp on the other side that Mrs. Morton had sent for him at half past ten.

"The message was phoned down by the lady herself," the clerk added, by way of explanation.

Duvall went up in the elevator, and a few moments later, was knocking at the door of Mrs. Morton's suite.

The latter herself appeared in the doorway. She was pale and agitated.

"Come in, Mr. Duvall," she said.

The detective entered, closing the door behind him.

"What is wrong, Mrs. Morton?" he asked.

"There has been another warning—a dreadful one," the older woman exclaimed, her voice trembling. "It came a little after ten."

"What was it?" Duvall's voice was almost as strained as that of the woman before him. Her words came to him as a complete surprise. Had all the work of the evening, then, been wasted?

"At a little after ten," Mrs. Morton said slowly, "I sent my maid Nora out for some medicine for my daughter. She went to a drug store some three blocks away. As she returned to the hotel, she saw a young woman standing near the entrance, apparently watching those who went in and out. As soon as the maid came up to the doorway, the woman stepped up to her, and thrusting a package into her hands, said quickly, 'Give this to Miss Ruth Morton. It is from the studio.' Then she walked away at once.

"Nora, as she tells me, did not know just what to do. You will remember that while she realizes from our presence here under an assumed name,

that something is wrong, she knows little or nothing of the circumstances surrounding Ruth's terrible persecution. Hence she foolishly took both the medicine and the package the woman had given her, to my daughter."

"Yes—yes—go on," Duvall exclaimed, seeing Mrs. Morton pause.

"Ruth opened them both. I was in the next room at the moment. Suddenly I heard a cry, and on rushing in, found her standing in the center of the room, holding a small bottle in one hand, and staring at it in the utmost consternation. In her other hand was a sheet of paper, which, as I subsequently found, had been wrapped around the bottle, inside the outer brown-paper cover.

"The bottle was labeled 'carbolic acid.' Here is the sheet of paper." Mrs. Morton, with trembling fingers, extended a half sheet of none-paper toward the detective.

Duvall took it and read the typewritten words upon it.

"We gave you thirty days. Now we give you seven. Drink this, and save yourself from a horrible fate." The death's head signature ended the message.

"Ruth has been very ill ever since," Mrs. Morton added drearily. "If she is not better in the morning, I shall call in a doctor. She felt herself absolutely safe, here, and was recovering her cheerfulness. Now all her fears have returned with redoubled force. I am terribly worried about her—terribly worried." Taking out her handkerchief, the poor woman wiped the tears from her eyes. "How could these people have known we were here?" she whispered, in an awed voice. "It seems like the work of fiends."

There was little that the detective could say in reply. Even to his sober judgment, there came a suggestion of the uncanny, the supernatural. The woman in the cab had escaped at half past nine, presumably quite ignorant of the location of Mrs. Morton's retreat. Half an hour later, the campaign of intimidation was renewed with greater vigor than before.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Morton," he said, "that it will be necessary for you to remain with your daughter every minute of the time, for a day or two. By then, I am convinced that we shall have laid our hands on the guilty parties. Good night."

Duvall rose very early the following morning,

and drove at once to the studio, but early as he was, Mr. Baker was there before him.

The latter was seated in his office, poring over a mass of reports, when Duvall entered. He glanced up, rose, shook hands nervously, then motioned to a chair.

"Nothing new yet," he said. "My stenographer, Miss King, is here. Neither Miss Green nor Miss Ford have yet arrived, but it is still a little early. Miss King came before her usual time, as she had some reports to get out that she could not complete last night. We have at least fifteen minutes to wait."

Duvall told him to proceed with his work, and drawing a newspaper from his pocket, made an effort to interest himself in it. In this, however, he was not very successful. Time after time his mind would wander from the printed sheet before him to the strange events of the night before. The thing that puzzled him most was, how did the persecutors of Miss Morton discover her new address so soon? Was the woman who had handed the package to Nora, the maid, the same one that had vanished from the cab? He remembered that it had been about nine o'clock when they left the

Grand Theater, and perhaps half-past when he had gone into the drug store in Sixth Avenue to get the aromatic spirits of ammonia. Had the woman gone directly from the cab to the hotel? She must have done so, without much loss of time, in order to reach there by ten o'clock. How had she known the address? He knew very well that he had given it to the cabman, when they started away from the theater. Had the supposedly fainting woman overheard his words? If she had, and had so promptly acted upon them, she was far more clever and determined than her appearance would seem to warrant. He revolved the matter endlessly in his mind, waiting for Mr. Baker to announce that the time had come, when Miss Ford's or Miss Green's arrival or non-arrival would indicate which of the two, if either, was the woman they sought.

Suddenly the bell of the telephone on Mr. Baker's desk ran sharply. He answered it, then turned to Duvall.

"Miss Green, the telephone operator, is at her desk," he said. "Would you like to take a look at her?"

"Yes." The detective arose, and followed Mr. Baker into the corridor.

The switchboard of the building was located at the end of the hall, in a small bare room. When they reached it, Mr. Baker spoke to a dark-haired, rather stout, woman who sat at the desk.

"Miss Green," he said, "if any calls come in for Mr. Duvall, he will be in my office." Then he went back along the corridor.

"She certainly isn't the woman we are after," he remarked to Duvall, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"No. It must be Miss Ford," the detective replied.

"Suppose we go to the developing and finishing department," Baker suggested. "It is time all our people were on hand. Mr. Emmett, who is in charge there, can tell us about Miss Ford."

They crossed to the other side of the building, and entered a small office. A bald-headed man sat at a littered desk.

"Mr. Emmett," Baker said, "shake hands with Mr. Duvall. He is looking for a young woman in the finishing department. Miss Marcia Ford. Has she come in yet?"

"No," replied the bald-headed man, gravely shak-

ing hands. "She is not here this morning. It is rather surprising, too, for she usually is on time."

"What sort of a looking woman is she?" Duvall inquired.

"Oh—a rather insignificant looking girl of about twenty-five. Small, slender, not very prepossessing, but clever—enormously clever. One of the best film cutters we have. I should be sorry to lose her."

"Light blue eyes, and light hair," Duvall questioned. "And a thin, rather cruel mouth?"

"Exactly. But why? Has she gotten into any trouble?"

"No—I hope not. I merely wanted to see her."

"Well—of course she may show up later, although as I say she has usually been very punctual. I shouldn't be surprised if she is sick. She's been acting rather peculiarly, the past few days."

"How so?" asked Duvall, quickly.

"I can't say—exactly. I got the impression from her manner that she was nervous, excited, out of sorts. Merely an impression, but such things count."

"Telephone me, Emmett," Mr. Baker said, "if

she comes in during the next hour. Come along, Mr. Duvall, you can wait in my office."

They returned to the other side of the immense building, and Duvall sat down to wait. He felt sure that they were on the right track, and was impatient to get back to New York and try to locate the missing woman. The description given by Mr. Emmett left little doubt in his mind that she and Miss Marcia Ford were one and the same. He sat in Mr. Baker's office, reading the paper, waiting anxiously for the hour the latter had specified to pass.

After what seemed an interminable wait, Mr. Baker glanced at his watch, then rose.

"It is ten o'clock, Mr. Duvall," he announced. "Miss Ford has not come, or Mr. Emmett would have notified me. I do not see that there is anything further to be accomplished here."

As he spoke, the telephone bell rang sharply. Mr. Baker picked up the receiver, listened intently for a few moments, then slammed the receiver back upon the hook.

"Hell!" he ejaculated softly.

"What is it?" Duvall asked.

"Miss Ford has just reported for work!"

PART III

CHAPTER XII

THE announcement, made by Mr. Baker, that Miss Marcia Ford, the film cutter, had reported for work, filled Duvall with astonishment. He had expected nothing of the sort, so convinced was he that the girl in question was the one they were looking for, the one who had been persecuting Ruth Morton, the motion picture star, with her threats.

He rose from his seat, in Mr. Baker's office at the studio, and turned toward the door. "If Miss Ford has reported for work," he said, "I had better take a look at her at once. If she is the woman who escaped from the cab, last night, I shall have no difficulty in recognizing her. But I am afraid it is out of the question. Knowing that both you and I had seen her, when she fainted at the theater, she would not dare to put in an appearance here to-day. The thing is utterly incomprehensible."

"Still, she might suppose that we would not suspect her, that she could carry on her work in the studio without anyone being the wiser. I seldom go into that part of the building, myself, and she would certainly not expect to see you. In fact, it may not have occurred to her that we suspect one of our employees, in spite of the stolen photograph or the fake telegram."

"Suppose we take a look at her at once. That will settle the whole question," Duvall urged.

"Very well." Mr. Baker closed his desk and the two men crossed the corridor and made their way into that part of the studio building devoted to the developing and finishing of the films.

Mr. Emmett, the head of the department, was seated at his desk when they arrived.

"So the Ford girl is here," Baker said at once.

"Yes, sir. She came in about ten minutes ago, explaining her lateness by saying that she was ill, when she got up this morning, and was not sure that she could get here at all. Shall I send for her?"

"No," Duvall interposed quickly. "Pardon me, Mr. Baker," he turned to the latter, "but if we send for this girl, it will arouse her suspicions. Of

course I do not think she is the woman we are looking for, but she may be in league with her. Would it not be better to have Mr. Emmett and yourself conduct me through the room in which she works, as though I were a visitor to the studio? You can readily point her out to me as we pass, and that will give me ample opportunity to recognize her, in case I have ever seen her before."

"I think that a very good idea," returned Baker. He said a few words to Mr. Emmett, and the three men set out to go through the rooms in which the film cutting and pasting were done.

At one of the tables a girl of about twenty was at work. As they passed, Mr. Emmett turned his head and nodded. The girl did not look up, and the three men continued their way through the room.

When they again reached the hall, Mr. Baker turned to Duvall.

"Well?" he questioned.

"It is not the woman," the detective said. "I did not suppose it would be. There is some slight resemblance, of course. The color of the eyes and hair is the same, and the features are somewhat alike. However, I am very much afraid, Mr. Baker, that I have wasted both your time and mine. And

yet, I cannot get over my original impression, that the person responsible for these threats is connected, in some way, with your company."

Baker, puzzled and disappointed as well, led the way back to his office. Duvall, however, when they reached it, did not enter.

"I shall not remain any longer, at present," he said. "I have an idea that I can accomplish more in town. Perhaps I may discover something there —some clue, that will enable us to make progress. I have a plan that may result in something."

"What is it?" Mr. Baker asked.

"I prefer not to say yet. If anything develops, I will let you know. Good day."

The taxicab in which he had made the trip down was still waiting for him. An hour later he had reached his hotel.

The disguise of the night before he had discarded. The woman in the cab had penetrated it. His presence, and that of Mrs. Morton, at the uptown hotel, was known. There seemed to be no further purpose, for the present, in attempting to preserve his incognito. He went to his room at once, and knocked on the door which separated it from the apartment of Mrs. Morton and her daughter.

The door was opened by the maid, who ushered him into the little parlor.

"I will tell Mrs. Morton that you are here," the girl said, and went into the next room.

Mrs. Morton came out presently, her face pale and drawn. Duvall knew at once that she had been up all night, watching, no doubt, beside her daughter.

"How is Miss Ruth?" he asked.

"She is better. She had a fairly good night's rest, and her fever has left her."

"I am glad to hear that. I hope there have been no further threats."

"No. Not yet. But I never know at what moment something may happen. It is terrible—terrible, living under a shadow like this."

As she spoke, the telephone bell rang.

"You answer it, Mr. Duvall," she said, turning quickly to the door by which she had entered, and closing it. "I do not think I can stand anything more at present."

Duvall took down the receiver. Someone was asking for Mr. John Bradley.

"This is Mr. Bradley," he said, then suddenly recognized his wife's voice.

"Is this you, Richard?" she asked.

"Yes. What is it?"

"If you have time, to-day, come down and see me. I have something I want to tell you. Something important."

"Very well. I will be there in half an hour. Good-by." He hung up the receiver.

"Was it anything—anything *more,* Mr. Duvall?" asked Mrs. Morton.

"No. Nothing of that sort. Well, I must go along now. I merely looked in to ask after your daughter. There is one thing I want you to do, however, and that is, let me have a key to your apartment on 57th Street."

Mrs. Morton took the key from her purse, and handed it to him.

"Haven't you any good news, yet?" she asked, somewhat pathetically.

"Not yet—at least nothing very definite. I know the woman who is annoying your daughter by sight, however, and I think I can safely assure you that she will be under arrest before very long. Matters of this sort take time, Mrs. Morton. Remember that I have had charge of the case but three days, and these people we are looking for are

shrewd, leaving few clues. But I feel that I shall have something definite to report very soon now."

"I hope so, I'm sure. Good day."

"Good day." Duvall left the room, and taking a taxi, drove down to see Grace.

He found her sitting at the writing desk, in the reception room of their suite, apparently busy over a letter. She pushed the sheet of paper aside, when her husband entered, and threw her arms about his neck.

"Richard!" she exclaimed, "I'm so glad to see you. It has been ages. What's the matter with you. You look dreadfully blue."

Duvall threw himself into a chair.

"I'm a bit disgusted with myself," he said.

"What about? I may ask you now, may I not? Is it about that wretched Morton case? I must talk to you about that. May I? You see, you rather got me into it, last night, and I got myself into it, too, by coming up to your hotel to see you, and now you've got to tell me how things turned out, after you left the theater, or I shall not know just what to do."

"About what?"

"I'll tell you that, after I hear about last night."

Duvall laughed, although a trifle grimly.

"I'm not particularly proud of last night," he said.

"Wasn't the woman who fainted the one you were after?" asked Grace.

"Yes. I'm sure she was. But unfortunately, she got away from me." He outlined to Grace the circumstances which led up to the woman's escape from the cab.

"You say she was a small, slight woman, with light hair?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Then I may know something about her."

"What?"

"I'll tell you. You remember that, when I came up to see you at the hotel yesterday afternoon, you were greatly put out, because you were afraid that I might have been followed, thus disclosing the name of your hotel to these people you are trying to avoid?"

"Yes. I was afraid of it. And the people in question did find out in some way where I had taken Miss Morton and her mother, as I discovered last night."

"They did not discover it through me."

"How do you know?"

"It came about in a curious way. After you told me, over the telephone, that you feared I might have been followed, I looked up the taxi driver who took me uptown, and asked him if anyone had tried to question him. I thought that possibly this hotel might have been watched, and, if so, the person who was watching it might have noticed the number of my car, or the driver, and later, applied to him for information. I saw him as soon as I returned. No one had done so."

"That is all very well, but they might have asked him, and found out where he drove you, later."

"They did ask him, later. Why is it, Richard, that you seem to forget that I have done detective work before, too? I suspected that he might be approached, and I subsidized him—gave him ten dollars, and instructed him to let me know, in case anyone questioned him about me."

"Well, late yesterday afternoon, a woman, answering the description you give, did apply to the cabman to find out where he had driven me. Naturally he told her nothing. Then, thinking, I suppose, that I might repeat my visit, she gave him

five dollars, and told him to let her know in case I drove from here to any other hotel. She figured, no doubt, that being your wife, I was certain to go and see you."

Duvall sat forward in his chair, an eager look upon his face.

"You did splendidly, Grace," he said. "Much better than I have done. But the important point is this. How was the cabman to let her know, and where? Did she give him her name and address?"

She gave him a name and address. It is about that, that I wanted to see you."

"What was it?"

"Alice Watson. General Delivery. He was to write her a letter."

Duvall sank back in his chair with a disappointed look.

"An assumed name, of course," he said. "I'm afraid it won't be of much service to us."

"But why? I was going to write this woman a letter, giving her the name of some other hotel—any one would do. Then, she would come there to find you, we could have the cabman, Leary, on watch to point her out, and in that way identify her and perhaps follow her to her home."

Duvall shook his head.

"It would have worked splendidly, my dear," he said, "except for the fact that in some way the woman has already discovered the name of my hotel. She will not go to the general delivery window at the post office to get it, now, for she already knows it. And if she did, she would realize as soon as she read your letter that you were not telling her the truth. Is that what you have been so busy about?" He glanced at the half-finished letter that lay on his wife's desk.

"Yes." Grace looked at him rather sheepishly. "I am terribly disappointed," she said. "I really hoped that I had discovered something that would help you." She took from the desk the piece of paper that contained Alice Watson's address, and tearing it into bits, dropped them slowly into the waste basket.

Duvall observed her action.

"What are you tearing up?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Merely the bit of paper that contained the woman's assumed name and address. It is of no use any longer." She glanced at a scrap of the paper, about half an inch square, that remained between her fingers, then started.

"There must have been something on the other side," she exclaimed. "There's a part of a name here—printed or engraved. It looks like 'Ford.' "

Duvall sprang from his chair and made a dive for the scrap basket.

"Ford!" he exclaimed. "That's queer!. We must get every scrap of that card at once."

It took the two of them several minutes to gather from the basket the tiny pieces into which Grace had torn the bit of paper. Then they fitted them together. Duvall saw at once, as soon as he picked up the first scrap, that the address had been written on a card. When the several pieces had at last been assembled upon the top of the desk, it became quite clear that the Watson name and address had been hastily scrawled upon the torn half of a visiting card. Slowly and carefully Duvall turned the bits over. The words engraved upon the opposite side filled him with delight.

There were first the letters "cia," followed by the name "Ford." Beneath were two figures, a "6" and a "2," and after them, West 57th Street.

Duvall gazed at the result in surprise, then taking

from his pocketbook the torn half of the card he had found the night before in the cab, he laid it beside the fragments on the desk. The two fitted exactly. The name and address were both plain. Evidently the woman who had interviewed the cabman, Leary, and the woman who had escaped from the cab were one and the same. She had taken a card from her purse, torn it in half, written the "Alice Watson" address that she gave the cabman on one half, and thrust the other back into her hand-bag. Later, when Duvall had attempted to examine the contents of the bag, the bit of card had fallen to the floor. All that was sufficiently clear.

Grace, looking over her husband's shoulder, read the completed name and address.

"Miss Marcia Ford," she exclaimed. "162 West 57th Street. Why, Richard, there is the name and address of the woman you want."

"It may be her address," her husband remarked, gloomily, "but it certainly isn't her name."

"But— Why not?"

"Because I saw Marcia Ford this morning, and *she isn't the woman!*"

Grace looked at him in astonishment.

"Are you sure?" she cried.

"Perfectly. Marcia Ford is not the one we are after."

"Then how do you explain the woman having a card with that name on it?"

"I don't explain it—unless," he paused for a moment in thought. "Unless this Ford woman, and the other one, are in league with each other, which might account for the latter having her card in her purse."

"And the address! Is that where Marcia Ford lives?"

"I don't know. It may be where they both live, for all I can tell. I only hope it is." He rose and took up his hat.

"Where are you going?" Grace asked.

"To 162 West 57th Street." Suddenly he took his wallet from his pocket, snatched a second card from it, and after looking at it for a moment, gave an exclamation of delighted surprise.

"What is it?" Grace asked quickly.

He thrust the card into her hand. Grace glanced at it, without quite understanding what it meant.

"I don't see what you mean," she exclaimed.

"The thing is clear enough. The card I have just given you belongs to Miss Ruth Morton."

"I see that, but——"

"Then surely you must see that Miss Morton's apartment also is on Fifty-seventh Street, and just two doors from the address of Miss Marcia Ford!"

CHAPTER XIII

DUVALL, upon discovering that the address of Miss Marcia Ford was on West 57th Street, but two doors from the building in which the Morton apartment was located, began to feel that he was on the right track. He had known, ever since his first day upon the case, that the mysterious messages found in Ruth Morton's bedroom had been placed there by some ingenious but perfectly natural means. The apparition that had so startled the girl upon her last night at the flat was capable, of course, of some reasonable explanation. When he left Mr. Baker in the morning his plan had been to go to Mrs. Morton's apartment and once more investigate all possible means of entrance, hoping that, by finding out how the messages were delivered, he might also be able to find out by whom. It was for this reason that he had asked Mrs. Morton for the key to the apartment.

Now the question seemed in a fair way to being

answered for him. The fact that this girl's room was located so near to the Mortons' apartment could not be a mere coincidence. There must be, between her room and the Morton flat some means of communication, although of what nature he could not now surmise. Fully convinced, however, that he might very soon find out, he hurried up to Fifty-seventh Street and walked along until he reached No. 162.

The house was, like that which immediately adjoined the apartment building, an old-fashioned one, of brown stone, with a high front stoop. It presented an appearance which, if not exactly dilapidated, was yet in strong contrast to the neat appearance of its neighbors. A printed card in one of the lower front windows indicated that roomers were wanted.

It was just the sort of place that Duvall had expected to find—just the sort of place in which a working girl like Marcia Ford would live. Located in a very excellent neighborhood, surrounded by apartment buildings and houses of the best type, it still could afford to rent rooms at the moderate figure that one of her class could pay. He went up the front steps and rang the bell.

"Is Miss Ford in? Miss Marcia Ford?" he asked.

The servant who came to the door, a neatly dressed German girl, shook her head.

"No, Miss Ford is not in. She usually gets back about half past six."

Duvall glanced at his watch. It was not yet three o'clock. He realized that he had a long wait before him.

"Will you leave any message?" the girl asked.

"No. It is not important. I will come back." Descending the steps he walked slowly in the direction of the apartment building, two doors away.

Entering, he made his way to Mrs. Morton's apartment. The place was just as they had left it, two days before. The windows had all been tightly closed and fastened, and there were no further mysterious messages lying about. Once more Duvall went to Ruth Morton's room, and opening the two windows looked out.

His investigations, however, told him no more than he had learned before. The three dormer windows in the home next door gazed vacantly down at him, their windows covered with cobwebs and

dust. The impossibility of anyone making their way from even the nearest of them, to the window where he stood, was manifest. And that a long rod or pole could have been utilized to introduce the letters into the girl's room was even more impossible. He shook his head, then turned to the other window, that facing upon the fire escape.

Here, as on the occasion of his previous examination, the smooth glossy surface of the freshly dried paint showed no marks, except those he had himself made during his former visit. And yet, as his eyes searched the grated surface, he saw that there was something there, something that had not been there before. He reached out and picked it up.

It was a woman's handkerchief, a tiny square of lace-edged linen, of an inexpensive variety. But it was not the mere presence of the handkerchief that so interested him. It might readily have belonged to Miss Morton herself, and have been accidentally dropped from the window. There were two things about this particular handkerchief, however, that marked it as a clue of the utmost value. One was the fact that in its corner was embroidered an initial, the letter "F." The other was that two of the corners of the handkerchief were knotted together,

as though it had been tied about someone's wrist, for what reason, he could not imagine.

The latter feature puzzled the detective greatly. He could not form any hypothesis to account for it. If the Ford woman, as indicated by the presence of the handkerchief, marked with an "F," had been on the fire-escape, why were there no tell-tale marks to indicate it? And if she had not been there, why was her handkerchief found there, knotted in this peculiar way? Had it formed part of some apparatus, some device, made of a pole and a cord, for inserting the threatening letters through the window? If so, it might, of course, have become detached while the device was being used. Duvall remembered that he had not examined the fire escape on the night when the astonishing apparition had appeared beside Ruth Morton's bed, *because the window opening on the fire escape had been closed and locked.* Had the handkerchief been left there then? He sat for a long time in the deserted library, trying to hit upon some reasonable theory to explain the matter, but his efforts resulted in failure. Not the least confusing feature of the affair was the fact that the woman, Marcia Ford, *was not the woman he was seeking.* He had seen

her at the studio that morning, and knew that she was not the one who had escaped from the cab the night before. Were there then two working together? If so, he would, through the Ford girl, in all probability be able to trace her confederate. He waited patiently until the waning afternoon light told him that it was time to begin his watch before the house at number 162.

Across the street a residence, closed for the summer, its front entrance boarded up, afforded him a convenient place to wait. He sat down upon the steps, and pretended to be occupied with a newspaper. His eyes, however, sought constantly the doorway opposite.

A number of persons entered the place, during the next two hours, but Marcia Ford was not amongst them. As the darkness began to approach, and lights in the streets and houses flared up, Duvall rose, crossed the street, and stationed himself at a nearer point, from which he might the more certainly identify anyone entering the house. Miss Ford, however, failed to appear.

From the sign in the window, to the effect that roomers were wanted, Duvall concluded that the Ford girl did not take her meals in the house. His

watch showed him that it was nearly seven. Doubtless she had arranged to dine before returning home. In a flash it came to him that his opportunity to make an examination of her room was now at hand.

To secure entrance to the room by the usual channels was clearly out of the question. The people at the boarding house would, of course, not permit it. But could he discover the means of communication, whatever they were, between Miss Morton's apartment and the girl's room, he might be able to enter the latter unknown and unobserved. He had thought of attempting this during the afternoon, but realized that he could not hope to accomplish it, in broad daylight, without being seen by the occupants of the neighboring buildings, and perhaps arrested as a burglar or sneak thief.

With a last glance down the street, he hastened back to the apartment building and made his way to Mrs. Morton's flat. Passing quickly through Ruth Morton's bedroom, he climbed out upon the fire escape and looked about.

Below him were the rear yards of the houses fronting on the next street. To the right he could see the bulk of the apartment building, blocking his view of the avenue beyond. To the left were

the rear buildings of the adjoining houses. It was quite dark, the sky was starless, but all about him gleamed the lights in the windows of the neighboring buildings.

Neither to the right, nor to the left was there any possible way by which access to the point where he now stood could be gained. From below, it was possible, although his previous examination had showed him both the fact that the newly painted surface of the fire escape was unmarred, and that the ladder at the lower floor was drawn up some nine or ten feet from the ground. He felt certain that Miss Ford had not reached Ruth's room in that way.

He glanced upward. The fire escaped stopped at the level of the floor above. To ascend from it to the roof was impossible.

Remembering that the top apartment was vacant, Duvall re-entered the building and hunting up the janitor, told him that he desired to get out on the roof.

The man remembered him, from his first visit, and the inquiries he had then made about the tenants of the apartment above.

"I am making some special inquiries on Mrs.

Morton's behalf," he explained. "You can go with me, if you like, to see that I do nothing I shouldn't."

The janitor joined in his laugh.

"I'm not worrying," he rejoined, "but I'll go along, just the same, to show you the way." He led the detective up one flight of stairs and, going to the end of the outer hall, unlocked and opened a small door beside the elevator shaft. A short spiral staircase was disclosed.

Snapping on an electric light, the man ascended the steps, and, after fumbling for a moment with the catch, threw open a trapdoor leading to the roof. In a moment both he and Duvall had climbed out upon the tiled surface. Duvall went to the edge which overlooked the house adjoining, and peered down. He at once saw something that interested him.

The house with the dormer windows consisted, as has been previously mentioned, of four stories and an attic. Its roof rose several feet above the level of the window of Ruth's room, which was on the fourth floor of the apartment building. But Duvall saw at once that this elevation of the adjoining house did not extend all the way back, but, in

fact, stopped a little beyond the point where it joined the apartment. From here to the rear of the lot the building had no attic, its rear extension being but four stories high. In this position on the apartment-house roof, the roof of the back building was at least fifteen feet below him.

Another thing that he noticed at once was the fact that the second house, No. 162, was of almost the same design as the first, that is, it consisted of a main building with an attic, and a rear extension, reaching to the same level as that of the house between. It was clear that if anyone living in the second house could obtain access to the roof of the back building, he would be able to walk across that of the first or adjoining house, and reach a point directly beneath where he stood.

But, granting the possibility of this, of what use would it be? A person on the roof below him would in no conceivable way be able to reach either of the windows of Ruth Morton's room. Was it possible that an opening had been made through the wall of the apartment building itself? He thought it unlikely, but determined to investigate.

"I must get down on that roof below," he informed his companion.

The janitor grinned.

"How are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Haven't you a ladder—a rope?"

The man thought a moment.

"I've got a short ladder in the cellar, only about eight feet long, I guess. I'm afraid it would not do."

"Yes it would," replied Duvall, pointing to the roof of the attic portion of the house below. I'll get down to the roof of the main part of the house first, and from there to the roof of the back building. An eight-foot ladder will be long enough for that. Bring it up, will you?"

The man hesitated.

"I don't just like this idea of going on other people's roofs," he said.

"You don't need to go. I've got to. I'm a detective, and I'm working for Mrs. Morton on a most important case." As he spoke, he took a bill from his pocket and pressed it into the man's hand.

The janitor responded at once.

"I'll fetch it up, sir," he said. "Wait for me here."

Duvall occupied the few moments consumed by the janitor's absence in examining, by means of his

pocket electric torch, the surface of the roof on which he stood. The smooth flat terra cotta tiles showed no distinguishing marks. Here and there spots of paint, marred by footprints, indicated where the painters at work on the building had set their buckets, no doubt while painting the wooden portions of the trapdoor, and the metal chimney-pots on the roof.

The man returned in a few moments with the ladder, and Duvall, lowering it to the level of the main portion of the adjoining house, saw that it was of sufficient length to permit his descent. In a moment he had slipped off his shoes, and was cautiously descending the ladder.

Once on the surface of the main roof of the house, he had intended to take down the ladder and, by means of it, descend the remaining six or seven feet to the roof of the back building, but he found that means for this descent already existed. A rough but permanent wooden ladder led from the higher level to the lower. Duvall judged that it had been placed there to provide easy communication between the upper roof and the lower. Leaving the ladder where it stood, he made his way down to the roof of the back building.

It was covered with tin, and he walked softly in his stockinged feet to avoid being overheard.

His first act was to go to the wall of the apartment house which faced him, and make a thorough examination of it by the light of his electric torch. He judged that in the position in which he now stood he was about on a level with the floor of Ruth's room. The brick wall of the apartment building facing him was blank, that is, it contained no windows. After a minute examination, Duvall was forced to the conclusion that no entrance to the girl's bedroom had been made through it. The bricks were solid, immovable, the cemented joints firm and unbroken. A moment later he turned to the left.

Here the rising wall of the attic story of the house faced him, reaching to a point above his head. Two dusty and long unopened dormer windows, similar to those facing on the court, confronted him. He remembered that the servant of the house next door had informed him, earlier in the week, that the attic was, and long had been, unoccupied.

Whether the attic was tenanted or not, however, had no bearing on the problem which confronted him. The windows might serve as a means whereby

anyone could reach the roof of the back building from the house proper, but they did not suggest any means whereby anyone might reach the windows of Ruth's bedroom. And by ascending to the point on the attic roof where his ladder stood, the problem was no nearer a solution, for a person standing there was on the edge of the court between the buildings, seven feet or more above the girl's bedroom window, and as many away from it. He turned away, and approaching the rear edge of the back building, looked over.

To his left, some eight feet away, was the fire escape before the rear window of the girl's bedroom. Standing on that sharp edge, he realized that in no way could he reach the railing of the fire escape, except by jumping, a feat that an expert gymnast might have hesitated to attempt, at that height above the ground. And could it be done successfully, what about the crash, the noise which must inevitably result from such a performance? What about the damage to the paint upon the fire escape's iron surface? And yet it would seem that a young girl had accomplished this feat, without noise, without making the least mark to register her passage. He thought of the telltale handkerchief,

which he had found on the fire escape earlier in the evening, then turned back with a feeling of annoyance. The thing was, he realized, an impossibility.

A sudden sense of the passage of time made him hurry to the roof of the rear building of the house at No. 162. Like its neighbor, it was built with an attic story, and in the rear were two dormer windows opening in the same way upon the lower roof. Could these windows, by any chance, be those of the room of Marcia Ford? It seemed highly probable, since, if she had operated from the roof, they could afford an easy way to reach it. Very cautiously he crept up to the nearer of the two windows and looked in.

The room before him was in total darkness, and the very faint radiance from without was not sufficient to enable him to distinguish anything within it. The window, however, he saw to his delight was open, and the opening, although small, was quite large enough to enable him to crawl in. Holding his electric torch in one hand, he crept into the room.

The beam of light from his torch, although powerful, was, of course, very concentrated. He

swept it about the room, to make sure that it was unoccupied. It was a small room, long and narrow, with the single dormer window, by which he had just entered, at one end, and a similar one at the side, in the slanting mansard roof. It contained a small bed, a chiffonier and dresser, a table, some chairs and a trunk. It was a woman's room; one glance at the dresser told him that, and a handkerchief lying crumpled on the latter's top proved to be identical with the one he had found on the fire escape, both in its general character, and in the initial "F" in one of its borders. Beyond any doubt, he was now in Marcia Ford's room.

Had he been inclined to doubt it, two photographs upon the wall would have convinced him. One was a picture of the Ford girl herself. The other was a portrait of the woman of the cab, the one that Duvall fully believed to be the author of the attacks upon Ruth Morton.

He examined the various articles about the room with the utmost care, but nothing of any interest rewarded his search. It had been his hope that he might find something of definite value—the typewriter, perhaps, upon which the threatening letters had been written, the black sealing wax, used in

making the death's-head seals, the paper employed by the writer. None of these things was in evidence; there was no typewriter, the table contained a small bottle of ink, a couple of pens, and some cheap envelopes and a writing tablet of linen paper quite different from that upon which the warning letters had been written. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the place to connect its occupant with the sending of the letters, except the room's location, in such close proximity to that of Ruth Morton, and the photograph of the woman of the cab, hanging upon the wall.

Duvall, greatly disappointed, was about to take his departure, when he observed at the far end of the room a door. Whether it led to another room, or to a bathroom, or merely to a closet, he did not, of course, know. There was danger, he fully realized, that Marcia Ford might return at any moment. There was equal danger that, upon opening the door, he might find himself in another room, possibly an occupied one. He thought at one time that he heard sounds on the far side of the door, but when he paused and stood listening he could distinguish nothing, and concluded that he had been mistaken.

Shutting off the light of his pocket torch for the moment, in order that, should the entrance lead to another room, its rays might not betray his presence, Duvall grabbed the door knob, and, turning it softly, opened the door.

For a moment he had a glimpse of a black cavern, and then, with incredible swiftness, something struck him a heavy blow in the face. What it was he was too much surprised and stunned to realize. His electric lamp fell from his hand, and clattered to the floor.

Realizing his helplessness in the almost total darkness, he bent down, groping about in an unsuccessful effort to recover the searchlight. And then, with a loud cry, a heavy body projected itself upon him, grasping wildly at his hair. An arm, clothed in some silken material, encircled his throat. He felt himself choking. And at the same moment a strange and irrational terror seized him. He seemed in the grasp of something uncanny, something inhuman, in spite of its very human cries. With a shudder he sprang to his feet, unable to locate the missing electric torch, and shaking the shrieking figure from him, plunged toward the window by which he had entered.

It was not alone the surprise, the nameless terror of the thing, that sent Duvall headlong from the room. He fully realized that the noise of the encounter, the shrieks of his assailant, would quickly bring the other inmates of the house to the room. He had no wish to be discovered there—his entrance had been too irregular, too illegal, for that. With extraordinary rapidity he flung himself through the window and without waiting to observe the results of his intrusion, sped swiftly across the roofs of the two buildings, up the steps to the attic roof, and from there, by means of the ladder, to the roof of the apartment building. The janitor sat where he had left him, smoking a pipe. Duvall looked back. Lights were visible in the room he had just left. He saw a figure, one that closely resembled Marcia Ford, cross the lighted area of the window. There was a second figure with her—smaller, shorter, he thought. Who—what was it that had attacked him? He stood in a daze, unable to grasp the meaning of the experience through which he had just passed.

The janitor took his pipe from his mouth and rose.

"Find what you were looking for?" he asked with a grin.

Duvall shook his head

"No," he said. "Not exactly. But I'm on the track of it."

"Want the ladder any more?"

"No, not to-night." He assisted the man to draw it up to the roof.

A few moments later he had reached the sidewalk. He glanced at his watch. It was just eight o'clock. As he walked toward the entrance of the house at No. 162, the front door opened, and a woman came out.

Duvall quickened his pace, but the woman was also apparently in a great hurry. She ran swiftly across the sidewalk, and sprang into a cab which stood beside the curb. Duvall was able to get but a fleeting glance at her, but that glance was enough to convince him that she was the mysterious prisoner who had so neatly given him the slip while in the cab the night before. He sprang forward with a cry, but before he had come within ten feet of the cab, the vehicle dashed off and proceeded at a rapid rate up the street.

A second cab came along at almost the same moment. Duvall hailed it, but the driver shook his head, indicating that he had a fare. In a moment

the second cab had passed, apparently in hot pursuit of the first. There were no other cabs in sight. With a growl of anger and annoyance Duvall turned back to the door of No. 162.

Should he ring the bell and ask for Miss Ford? he wondered. Of what use would it be, to request an interview? Yet there seemed to be nothing else that he could do. Miss Ford had not left the house, although the other woman, apparently her confederate, had done so. He stood in the shadow of the apartment building, trying to decide what move he should make next.

CHAPTER XIV

GRACE DUVALL, on being left at the hotel by her husband, spent a long and very tiresome afternoon. She had expected Richard back long before, with news, perhaps, of a successful investigation of the woman, Marcia Ford, whose address was so near that of the Mortons. But when six o'clock came, and went, with no news of her husband, Grace came to the conclusion that he had probably struck a long trail, and being a normally healthy person, with an excellent appetite, she went to the dining room and ordered dinner, leaving word at the desk where she would be, in case Richard returned.

Her lonely meal was over by seven, and, not knowing what to do next, Grace went out on the sidewalk, with the intention of looking for her friend of the evening before, the taxicab driver, Leary. It was possible that the man might have something more to report. As she reached the door, she saw him descend from his cab.

He came forward at once, tipping his cap.

"Taxi, ma'am," he asked.

"No, I don't think so, Leary. Anything new?"

"Not a thing, ma'am. Haven't seen that party since. Can't I take you for a drive, ma'am?"

Grace was on the point of refusing, when a sudden idea came to her. She hastily opened her pocketbook, tore out the pieces of the visiting card that Duvall had left upon the table, and fitted them together.

"Drive me to 162 W. 57th Street," she directed, and stepped into the cab.

Leary touched his cap, and in a few moments they were speeding up the Avenue.

"Don't go right up to the address," Grace told him through the speaking tube. "Stop a little below, but in a place where I can see the door."

The man nodded, and a little later they turned into 57th Street and drew up alongside the curb.

"Do you think you would recognize the woman who gave you the card, last night?" Grace asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I think I should, ma'am."

"Very well. Watch the doorway of number 162. If she goes in let me know. If she comes out, follow her. I shall probably recognize her myself,

if she is the woman I think. I saw her for a few moments at the Grand Theater last night. But she may not be the same one. We'll know that later."

Leary nodded, and they began a long wait. After what seemed to Grace an interminable time, they saw a taxicab come rapidly down the street, execute a turn, and draw up before the door of number 162.

Grace, as soon as she realized the cab's destination, sprang to the sidewalk and strolled carelessly along in the direction of the house. The cab came to a standstill just before she reached it, and two women got out. One of them Grace had never seen before. The other she recognized at once. It was the woman who had fainted in the theater the previous night.

Neither of the women paid any attention to her, but directing the cabman to wait, passed quickly into the house.

Grace went back to her cab and got in.

"The woman I am looking for has just driven up in that cab," she said. "She has gone into the house. The cab is to wait. When she comes out again, follow her."

Leary nodded, and the two of them settled down for what they supposed would be a long wait. To their surprise, scarcely ten minutes had passed before the door of No. 162 was suddenly opened, and the woman whom Grace had recognized dashed down the steps and sprang into the waiting cab. At almost the same moment Grace saw her husband start forward from the direction of the apartment building, as though in pursuit of her.

There was no time, however, to wait for him. The cab ahead had already started off, and Leary, true to his instructions, was speeding after it. In a moment both vehicles had turned into Seventh Avenue and were driving rapidly uptown.

As minute after minute sped by, Grace began to realize that the chase might prove a long one. They had already crossed to Central Park West, and were now speeding northward again in the neighborhood of 72nd Street. Then, to Grace's surprise, the cab ahead swerved into a side street, and drew up before the entrance of the hotel at which Ruth Morton and her mother were stopping. The cab had no sooner stopped than the woman sprang out and entered the lobby.

Grace followed her without a moment's hesita-

tion, ordering Leary to wait. The woman hurried up to the desk and, taking a blank card from it, scribbled a few words upon it in pencil, and handed it to the clerk. Grace was unable to hear what she said to him, but the man nodded, and handed the card to a bellboy. The woman sat down in a nearby chair.

Grace, having nothing else to do, and being somewhat afraid that the woman might recognize her, crossed at once to the opposite side of the lobby and, going to the news stand, spent some time in selecting and purchasing a magazine. She stood with her back to the woman, screened by a large palm, but at the same time managed to keep a fairly close watch upon her.

It was several minutes before anything happened. Then an elderly lady emerged from one of the elevators, and under the guidance of a bellboy approached the woman Grace had been following. Grace did not remember having ever seen the older woman before, but she had a distinct impression that it might be Mrs. Morton. She strolled over to the desk, and addressed the clerk in a low voice.

"Is that Mrs. Morton—the elderly lady in black?" she asked.

The clerk stared at her, but his reserve melted before her charming smile.

"No, Miss," he said. "That is Mrs. Bradley."

"Thank you." Grace gave a sigh of relief, and turned away.

Looking once more toward the two women, she saw that the older one was addressing her companion with something of reserve, as though she had never met her before. The younger woman spoke quickly, smilingly, for a few moments, shook hands with her companion, and turned away. Grace saw that she was about to leave, and at once followed her, although at a little distance, so as not to excite her suspicions. When she reached the sidewalk the other woman had already entered her cab, and seemed about to drive off.

The cab, however, merely moved to a position a little further down the street, and by the time Grace had entered her own vehicle the other had again become stationary.

This maneuver struck Grace as extremely peculiar. She told Leary to remain where he was, and with some misgivings, awaited the woman's next move.

After a time she saw Mrs. Bradley, who had gone

toward the elevators as Grace left the lobby, come out, signal for a taxicab, and drive quickly off. Leary was obliged to draw up with his machine, in order to leave a clear space before the door.

A few seconds later Grace saw the woman she had been following spring from her cab, come rapidly along the sidewalk, and once more enter the lobby. Grace again followed her, just in time to see that instead of applying at the desk, as before, she went directly to one of the elevators, entered, and was whisked out of sight.

Grace's heart almost stood still with fear. She had not appreciated the meaning of the woman's actions before. Now they were only too clear. She had evidently gotten Mrs. Morton, whom Grace suddenly remembered had been registered under an assumed name, out of the way on some pretext or other, and had gone to Ruth's room, with the intention, no doubt, of carrying out her previous threats. The situation was frightful. It would admit of no delay. Grace dashed to the desk and began to speak rapidly, in a frightened voice, to the clerk.

"That woman"—she exclaimed—"the one who just went up in the elevator—she is going to Miss Ruth Morton's room—you must stop her—there is

no telling what she may not do—send up, quick—quick! Miss Morton is in the greatest danger."

The clerk looked at her, his mouth half open with surprise.

"I—what do you mean, Miss? I don't understand you. We have no Miss Morton here." He regarded Grace apprehensively, and out of the corner of his eye looked toward the cashier, as though he contemplated calling on him for assistance in case this apparently mad woman became violent.

Grace gave a groan of despair.

"The daughter of the elderly lady, about whom I asked you before. Her name is Morton. Her daughter Ruth is staying here under an assumed name—Bradley, you say it is. Oh—please be quick. I know what I am talking about. That woman who came here a while ago is a dangerous character. She gave Mrs. Morton some message or other to get her out of the way, and as soon as she had gone came back into the hotel and went upstairs in the elevator. Didn't you see her?"

"Yes, Miss, I saw her. She was a friend of Mrs. Bradley's, she said, and I supposed Mrs. Bradley had told her to go upstairs."

"I tell you, that woman who just went upstairs

means harm—terrible harm, to Miss Bradley—Miss Morton. Oh—don't stand there wasting time. Come up with me at once, and you will see that I am right——"

"But—who are you, Miss? What have you to do with the matter?"

"What difference does that make, if what I say is true? If you must know, I am a detective employed by Mrs. Morton——"

"Employed by Mrs. Morton! And yet you didn't know her when you saw her! My dear woman, your story does not hang together——"

"It is my husband, Mr. Duvall, who is employed by her. He was registered here under the name of Bradley, too. I am trying to help him."

"Oh!" The clerk seemed somewhat more inclined to accord her serious attention. "Very well. I will go to the room with you, and see if everything is all right."

"And hurry, please—hurry." Grace started toward the elevators.

Then a sudden thought came to her. Suppose the woman was to make her escape, coming down in one of the elevators, while she and the clerk were going up in another. There had been ample time,

she knew, for her to have murdered Ruth, were that her plan, and have already left the room.

"Wait just a moment," she cried to the clerk, who had said a few words to one of his assistants and was leaving the desk to join her. "I must speak to my cabman, but I'll be back in a moment." She dashed through the entrance doors and hurried to the point where Leary sat at his steering wheel.

"Wait here," she whispered to him, "until I come back, unless the woman we have been following comes out. If she does come out, and drive away, follow her, and find out where she goes. Then telephone me here. I will leave my name at the desk, and wait until I hear from you."

Leary nodded, and Grace quickly re-entered the lobby and joined the waiting clerk.

"Instruct your telephone operators," she said to him, "to let me know, in case anyone calls up Mrs. Duvall."

The clerk gave the necessary instructions, and the two then entered one of the elevators and quickly made their way to the seventh floor, upon which Mrs. Morton's apartment was located.

There was no one in the corridor when they left

the elevator, and the clerk, who knew the location of the suite, hastened to it at once.

They reached the door. Grace was conscious of a feeling of apprehension, a sense of impending disaster. Her heart pounded violently as she waited for the answer to the clerk's knocks. She waited in vain. Only silence, grim, terrible, rewarded his efforts.

"Something *has* happened," Grace whispered, as the clerk again rapped upon the door, this time more loudly than before.

Again there was no reply, no evidence of the presence of anyone in the girl's rooms.

"Open the door!" Grace cried. "Something terrible must have occurred!"

The clerk took the pass key with which he had provided himself, and inserted it in the lock. A moment later the door swung open, and the two of them entered the room.

It was in total darkness. Grace clutched at her heart, fearing what she believed the switching on of the lights would reveal. The clerk, without loss of time, pressed the push button near the door. The room was at once flooded with light.

Grace glanced about, then gave a momentary sigh

of relief. The room, the small parlor of the suite, was quite vacant. At its further end the door to Ruth Morton's bedroom stood ajar.

With the clerk beside her, Grace hurriedly crossed the room. With a prayer in her heart she pushed open the bedroom door. Her companion at the same moment felt along the door-jamb for the electric switch. In an instant the bedroom lights were turned on.

Then Grace saw that her fears had been fully justified. On the floor, halfway between the door and the bed, lay Ruth Morton, apparently lifeless. Her face was the color of chalk, her eyes were closed. With a cry, Grace fell on her knees beside the unconscious girl and with trembling fingers felt her heart. The clerk, a weak-faced young man, stood gazing at the scene before him in amazed horror.

"She isn't dead!" Grace exclaimed, turning an excited face to him. "Her heart is still beating. Send for a doctor, quick!" Then, taking the unconscious girl in her arms, she lifted her to the bed.

CHAPTER XV

RICHARD DUVALL, realizing that the woman he sought had once more eluded him, was for the moment unable to decide what to do next. He was oppressed by a sense of failure. Apparently this enemy of Ruth Morton's was far more resourceful than he had supposed. She had gotten clear away, and there appeared no means by which he could trace her. That the second cab, the one he had hailed, contained Grace, did not of course occur to him. The trail appeared to be hopelessly lost.

Still, his investigations in Miss Ford's room had not been entirely fruitless, although they had also added a startlingly new element to the mystery of the case. Who was the person who had attacked him from the closet? Was it the woman who had just left the house? He did not think so. Nor was it Miss Ford herself. There had been something uncanny about the whole experience; he was

by no means certain that his assailant had been a human being at all. And yet, its cries—its fingers, tearing at his throat. He was unable to account for the experience at all, and determined, as soon as possible, to repeat his visit, and sift the matter to the bottom.

He remembered that he had seen two persons in the Ford girl's room, after his hasty retreat. Two women, he thought, outlined against the lighted square of the window. One of these had already left the house. The other, Miss Ford herself, was still there. He determined to interview her at once.

Of course, he told himself, to do so would put her on her guard, but his visit to her room had already done that, and doubtless accounted for her companion's hasty flight. And there was something to be gained, by letting her realize that she was under suspicion. She would at once try to communicate with, to warn, her confederate, and it was in just such ways as this, Duvall's experience told him, that criminals so often betrayed themselves. If, by frightening Miss Ford, he could cause her to flee—to join her companion—the tracing of the latter would become comparatively simple. He

went up to the door of No. 162 and rang the bell.

The same woman answered his summons as had answered before. She seemed somewhat uneasy—disturbed.

"I want to see Miss Marcia Ford," Duvall told her.

"Very well, sir. Come in. I will tell Miss Ford. What name, please?"

"Say that Mr. Bradley is calling."

The girl ushered him into a dark parlor, lighted by a single lowered gas jet, and suggestive of the gloom of ages, in its walnut furniture, its dismal pictures and ornaments. He took a seat, and waited for the appearance of Miss Ford.

She arrived in a few moments, a slender, ordinary-looking girl, in white shirtwaist and black skirt.

"You are Mr. Bradley?" she asked, regarding the detective with a look of inquiry.

"Yes. I came to see you about a matter of importance.

"What is it?"

"Who was the woman who just left here—the woman who had just come in with you?"

Miss Ford favored the detective with a glassy stare.

"I do not understand you," she exclaimed. "I came home alone. What is the purpose of these questions?"

Duvall felt that he had a shrewd opponent to deal with.

"Are you acquainted with Miss Ruth Morton?" he asked.

"Why—certainly—that is, I know her by reputation. She works for the same company as I do. Why do you ask?"

"Miss Morton has recently been the subject of a shameful persecution. The woman who just left this house is concerned in it. Who is she?"

"I do not know what you are talking about," the girl exclaimed, angrily. "I know nothing about any woman. You must pardon me, Mr. Bradley, if I decline to be questioned in this way any further." She moved toward the door.

"Then you wish me to understand that the woman who just left this house did not come here with you?"

"Understand anything you please. I decline to

be questioned any further." With a look of anger she left the room.

Duvall made his way back to the sidewalk, thoroughly satisfied with the results of his visit. The Ford woman, in the first place, had lied. The other woman had been with her, beyond a doubt. Duvall thought of her picture on the wall of Miss Ford's room. The latter's reason for lying was equally clear. She and the woman with her were guilty.

In the second place, Miss Ford now realized fully that she was under direct suspicion. If, this being the case, she failed to take some step that would be fatal to both her confederate and herself, Duvall felt that he would be very much surprised. He made up his mind to keep close watch upon the house.

Suddenly it occurred to him that Grace might be of immense service to him at this juncture. She could follow the Ford girl, unknown, unrecognized, while he himself could not. He decided to call her up at once, and ask her to join him.

At the corner, the lights of a saloon glowed brilliantly. With a final glance at the dark doorway of No. 162, he walked quickly down the street

He felt that, if he hurried, he need not be away from his post more than a few moments.

The call to his hotel developed the fact that Grace was not in. There was a lady asking for him, however, the clerk said, an elderly woman, who gave her name as Mrs. Morton. She had just come in, and seemed greatly agitated at not having found him.

The name, Mrs. Morton, filled Duvall with sudden apprehension.

"I'll speak to her, please," he said. A moment later, he recognized the voice of Mrs. Morton over the 'phone.

"Is this Mr. Duvall?"

"Yes."

"This is Mrs. Morton. Your wife came to me, a little while ago, and said that you wanted to see me at your hotel at once. She explained that it was of the utmost importance. Why are you not here?"

"I sent no such message."

"No such message! Then who did?"

"I do not know. You left your daughter alone?"

"Yes."

"Then, Mrs. Morton, I am afraid you have been

imposed upon. Wait where you are. I will join you at once."

"Hurry, then, Mr. Duvall. If what you say is true, we do not know what may have happened."

"I will be with you in fifteen minutes."

The astonishing news given to him by Mrs. Morton filled Duvall with alarm. Clearly the supposed message from him had been part of a scheme to get her away from the hotel, to leave Ruth there alone. He scarcely dared think of the consequences. The following of Miss Ford now became a matter of secondary importance. Fearing the worst, he signaled to a passing taxicab, and drove as rapidly as possible to his hotel.

Mrs. Morton awaited him in the lobby. She was in a state of the utmost excitement.

"We must go back to the hotel at once," she cried. "Ruth is there all alone."

"Where is her maid, Nora?"

"I let her go out, this evening."

"Then you should not have left the hotel."

"I would not have done so, but for this imperative message from you."

"What was the message?"

"Your wife, or at least a woman claiming to be

your wife, came to see me a little after eight o'clock. She said you had arrested the woman who has been sending these threats to my daughter, and that you needed me at once, to make a charge against her at the police station. I naturally came here immediately."

"The woman who told you this—she couldn't have been my wife. Describe her."

"She was slight, small, neatly but not expensively dressed, with light eyes and hair."

"That was not Mrs. Duvall, but it answers very well the description of the woman we are seeking. What did she do, when you left the hotel?"

"I thought she also left."

"You are not sure of this?"

"No."

"Then we have no time to lose. Come." He escorted Mrs. Morton to a taxicab, and instructed the chauffeur to drive to her hotel at top speed.

Mrs. Morton had very little to say on the way uptown. She was naturally in a state of greatest excitement. Duvall, too, was greatly concerned. He knew that the false message had not been given by Grace. What purpose had the woman in mind,

in getting rid of Mrs. Morton? The realization of what might have happened to Ruth alarmed him beyond measure.

The drive to the hotel occupied but a few moments, but to Duvall it seemed hours. When they at last drew up before the hotel door, he sprang to the sidewalk, ordered the chauffeur to wait, and with Mrs. Morton at his side, hurried into the lobby.

"Give me my key," Mrs. Morton cried, pausing for a moment at the desk. Then, with Duvall at her heels, she rushed to the elevator.

As soon as they arrived at the door of the suite, it was apparent that something was wrong. The door stood open. The clerk, with one of the maids, occupied the little parlor. Through the open door of the bedroom Duvall caught a glimpse of Ruth, lying in bed, the figure of a heavily-set, bearded man bending over her.

"Mrs. Bradley!" the clerk exclaimed, as soon as he caught sight of Mrs. Morton. "I'm so glad you have come. Your daughter has had an—an accident!"

Mrs. Morton paid scant attention to his words. She, too, had seen through the doorway the figure

of her daughter lying in the bed. With a cry, she passed the clerk unnoticing, and went toward the bedroom door.

"Ruth!" she exclaimed, in an agonized voice, then rushed into the room beyond.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Grace Duvall, accompanied by the hotel clerk, found Ruth Morton lying on the floor in the parlor of her suite, her first act had been to call for a doctor.

Her second was to gather the unconscious girl in her arms, and carry her into the adjoining bedroom.

That Ruth was alive, filled Grace with joy. She had feared something far worse might have befallen the girl. Yet it was clear that some terrible shock had operated to reduce her to the condition in which she had been found. What this shock was, Grace could only surmise.

She placed the girl upon the bed, and proceeded to remove her clothing. By the time she had gotten her beneath the sheets, the clerk came in, accompanied by the hotel physician.

The latter, after a hasty examination, turned to Grace with a grave look.

"The young woman has experienced a terrible shock of some sort," he said. "She is very weak, and her heart action is bad." He took some tablets from a bottle in his medicine case, and called for a glass of water. "Severe nerve-shock of this sort is a serious matter," he exclaimed. "Sometimes it is fatal, at others the mind may be permanently affected. The young lady must be kept absolutely quiet, of course. We will hope for the best. Give her a tablespoonful of this solution every hour. Force her to take it, even if she does not regain consciousness. I will look in again in an hour or two. But be sure that she is kept absolutely quiet."

Grace sat beside the unconscious girl for a long time in silence. Once she went into the next room and called up her hotel, thinking that Richard might have returned, but he had not. She felt that she could only wait where she was, until some word came from Leary.

The clerk, as soon as Ruth was attended to, had hastened down to the lobby, only to learn that the woman who had gone to Miss Bradley's room had not been seen.

It must have been almost an hour before Grace

was informed by one of the bellboys that someone wished to speak to her on the telephone. She did not take the message in Ruth's room, the management having given instructions that no calls were to be transmitted there for fear of arousing the unconscious girl. She went quickly downstairs in the elevator, and repaired to a booth in the lobby. One of the maids had been left to watch over Ruth.

The message was from Leary, as Grace had anticipated.

"Is this you, Mrs. Duvall?" the cabman asked.

"Yes. What have you discovered?"

"The lady got into her cab a little while after you left me, and drove away. I followed, as you told me to do. She drove to an apartment on 96th Street, left her taxicab, and entered. The cab drove away. I'm waiting across the street, in a drug store. The apartment is on the corner, 96th Street and Columbus Avenue. Shall I stay here?"

"Yes. Wait until I come." Grace left the booth, and hunting up the clerk, told him that she was obliged to go out at once.

"Mrs. Morton should be back very soon," she

said. "One of the maids is sitting with Miss Ruth. Hadn't you better stay with her, as well?"

The clerk nodded, then saw the doctor coming through the lobby.

"Here's Dr. Benson," he said. "I'll send him up. The young lady will be quite safe, until her mother comes."

Grace bowed to the doctor, then hurried out of the hotel, and jumping into a taxi, ordered the driver to take her to Columbus Avenue and 96th Street. She felt overjoyed, to know that the woman Duvall had been seeking had at last been run to earth. She should, Grace determined, not escape a second time.

At 96th Street, she found Leary, impatiently waiting for her in the doorway of the corner drug store from which he had telephoned. He saw her as soon as she left the cab and, tipping his cap, came forward and joined her.

"She's in there yet, Miss," he whispered, jerking his thumb toward the building on the opposite corner.

Grace glanced in the direction indicated. A somewhat dingy-looking apartment house stood upon the corner; its lower floor occupied by a florist's shop.

The entrance was on 96th Street. Leaving Leary on the opposite corner, she crossed the street and entered the vestibule of the building.

The mail boxes on either side contained five names each, indicating that there were ten apartments in the building. Grace looked over the addresses in them carefully, but none of them meant anything to her. None was at all familiar. The name on the torn card had been Ford, but there was no such name among those before her. How was she to tell to which apartment the woman had gone? The situation presented an interesting problem.

Making a list of the names upon a visiting card, Grace determined to try them each in turn. She had observed that the building contained no elevator. She rang one of the bells, and almost at once the clicking of the catch told her that the front door was unlocked. She turned the knob and entered.

The occupants of the two ground floor apartments were named Weinberg and Scully, respectively. Grace tried both doors in succession, asking for Mrs. Weinberg at the one, and for Mrs. Scully at the other. In each case the woman who appeared

bore no resemblance to the one she sought, and she was obliged to pretend that she had made a mistake. The doors were at once closed in her face.

It was not until she reached the fourth floor that success rewarded her efforts. The left-hand apartment on this floor had as its tenant a Miss Norman. To Grace's delight, she had scarcely rung the bell, when the woman she had been following appeared, wearing a flowered kimona.

She looked at Grace keenly, suspiciously, but with no sign of recognition. Whether she did not know her, or merely pretended not to do so, Grace was unable to say. After all, it made little difference. Having now located the woman, it was only necessary to get away, upon some pretense or other, and telephone to Richard. She felt highly elated.

"What do you want?" the woman asked, quickly.

"Are you Miss Norman?"

"I am."

"Miss Norman, I have come to try to interest you in the work we are doing on behalf of the suffering people of Poland. The war, as you

know——" Grace reeled off this appeal, feeling quite certain that the woman would reject it at once, and thus leave her free to go. But as it turned out, Miss Norman did nothing of the sort.

"I am always interested in worthy charities," she remarked, with a peculiar smile. "Won't you come in?" She held wide the door.

Grace found herself in a quandary. Was this a plot to get her inside the apartment, or was the woman in earnest? It seemed unlikely, and yet, Grace feared the danger, now that she had gone so far, of arousing the other's suspicions by a refusal.

"I—I will come in for a moment," she said, and an instant later found herself in a small, rather poorly furnished living room. The woman closed the door, and followed her. Grace braced herself for a possible attack, but none came.

"Sit down," her hostess said, indicating a chair.

"No. It is too late for that. If you care to subscribe anything——"

"But you must tell me more about your work."

"It is very simple. The money is expended by the Polish Relief Committee, to relieve the starving and destitute sufferers in the war zone."

"I see. It seems a worthy charity. I will think the matter over. Suppose you call again."

Grace began to breathe more freely.

"I will do so, of course," she said, moving toward the door.

The woman preceded her.

"Let me open it," she said. "The catch has a habit of sticking." She fumbled with the lock.

Grace was so completely deceived by the woman's actions that she momentarily relaxed her guard. As her companion drew the door open, Grace bade her good night and started to go. The instant her back was turned, she felt a slender but muscular arm slide about her neck, and she was instantly dragged backward, unable, on account of the pressure upon her throat, to utter a sound.

Her attempt at a cry for help was smothered before it became audible. She saw, as in a dream, the woman before her drive the door to with her shoulder. Then she was whirled backward and thrown violently upon a low couch.

She grasped the arm of her assailant and struggled with all her might, but to no purpose. The woman bent over her, her hands at her throat. Grace's brain reeled. Everything seemed black

before her eyes. She gasped, trying in vain to breathe, but the fingers upon her throat were momentarily tightening. Then, almost before she realized it, the objects in the room swam vaguely before her eyes, and she lost consciousness.

PART IV

CHAPTER XVII

DUVALL, on his arrival with Mrs. Morton at her apartment, lost no time in finding out from the clerk just what had happened. The story, pieced together, confirmed his worst suspicions.

The woman, after escaping from the house at 162 West 57th Street, had gone at once to Ruth's hotel, followed by Grace. Here she had interviewed Mrs. Morton, represented herself as Grace Duvall, and induced Mrs. Morton to leave the hotel by giving her a fictitious message purporting to be from himself.

Returning, later, to the hotel, she had gone to Ruth Morton's room and attacked her. The nature of that attack, the effect upon the girl, were as yet uncertain. Ruth Morton was still unconscious.

Meanwhile, as he learned from the clerk, Grace had received a telephone message and hurriedly left

the hotel. The clerk did not know from whom the message had come.

Duvall went to Ruth Morton's bedroom, and called the doctor aside.

"What is the exact nature of Miss Morton's injuries?" he asked.

"She has no injuries, at least in the sense I think you mean. She is suffering solely from the effects of shock."

"What sort of shock?"

"I do not know, of course. Fright, of some sort, terrible fright, I should say. I am informed that some woman, some enemy of hers, came to this room, and was alone with her."

"There is no evidence of any violence?"

"None whatever. But the effects of shock are often worse than those of actual physical violence. They have frequently been known to cause death."

"You do not, I hope, anticipate anything of the sort in this case."

"I cannot say." The doctor shook his head. "She must have been very weak. Her system is responding very slowly."

Duvall glanced over to where Mrs. Morton hung in agonized silence over her daughter's bed, then

went out into the sitting room. It seemed to him well nigh incredible that the woman responsible for all this had been able to move about, to elude pursuit, to carry out her threats, apparently without the least hesitation or fear of capture. His professional pride had received severe shock.

Two means of finding the woman, he felt, were still open to him. One was to trace her through Miss Ford. He did not doubt that, after what he had said to the latter, she would make an immediate attempt to warn her confederate of the danger that threatened her. Of course, the Ford girl might communicate with her companion by telephone, in which event the tracing would be difficult, if not impossible.

The other hope of tracing the woman lay in Grace. Why had she left the hotel so suddenly? He did not of course know the source of the telephone message, and could only surmise that Grace had in some way been able to pick up the woman's trail.

Leaving Mrs. Morton with a few words of encouragement, he made his way to his hotel. There was no news there of Grace, however, and he realized that it was now too late to accomplish anything

by returning to the house on 57th Street. Marcia Ford would either have long since retired, or else would have left the house to communicate with the woman who had been with her earlier in the evening. Considerably upset by the events of the past three hours, Duvall retired to his room, and sat down to think the whole matter over.

Proceeding on the assumption that the woman in question, and Miss Ford were acting together, all the events at the studio, the fake telegram, the missing photograph, became intelligible. But the delivery of the letters in Ruth Morton's apartment, the strange attack upon him while searching the Ford girl's room, were by no means so clear. Once more his thoughts reverted to the attic room, the roof of the adjoining house, the problem of effecting an entrance to the Morton apartment through either of the two windows.

And then, as he revolved the problem in his mind, a sudden light came to him. He sprang from his chair with an exclamation of satisfaction. A solution of the whole matter flashed through his brain, a solution at once so simple, and so ingenious, that he wondered he had not thought of it before.

He glanced at his watch. It was midnight. Too

late, perhaps, to test the accuracy of his deductions. Nor did he feel at all easy in his mind regarding Grace. Something must have happened to her, he feared, to keep her out so late, with no word to him concerning her movements. He went to the 'phone, and calling up the office, inquired whether anything had been heard of Mrs. Duvall.

"No," the night clerk informed him. Mrs. Duvall had not been heard from, nor had she sent any message. But a note had just been left for her. He would send it up.

Duvall awaited the arrival of the note with the utmost impatience. A message for Grace. From whom? What could it mean? A few moments later one of the bellboys thrust into his hand a letter, written on the note paper of the hotel.

He regarded the scrawling and ill-written superscription with apprehension, then tore open the envelope and proceeded to read the contents of the note.

"Dear Madam," it said. "I waited till nearly midnight. When you did not come, I thought you must have gone out some other way, so came back to the hotel. I hope I did right. Respectfully yours, Martin Leary."

Duvall stared at the words before him with a look of alarm. Who was Martin Leary? And where had he waited for Grace until nearly midnight? And, above all, why had she not returned? Had some accident, some danger befallen her? The circumstances made it seem highly probable.

There was but one thing to do—to question the night clerk, and find out, if possible, who Leary was. He rushed to the elevator and made his way to the lobby with all speed.

"Who left this note for Mrs. Duvall?" he asked of the clerk.

"Why"— the man paused for a moment—"one of the cabmen, I believe."

"Is his name Leary—Martin Leary?"

"Yes. It was Leary, come to think of it. Nothing wrong, I hope, Mr. Duvall."

"I'll know later. Where is Leary now?"

"Couldn't say, sir. You might ask the cab starter?"

Almost before the clerk had finished speaking, Duvall had darted across the lobby and made his way to the taxicab office at the door.

"Taxi, sir?" the man asked.

"Do you know a chauffeur named Martin Leary?" exclaimed Duvall.

"Yes, sir. One of our regular men, sir."

"Where is he?"

The starter glanced along the row of taxicabs.

"He's turned in for the night, sir. Left for the garage some time ago. He's been on duty since early this morning."

"Where is the garage?"

"On Lexington Avenue, sir, near 30th Street."

"Does Leary sleep there?"

"No, sir. I don't think so, sir. They would know at the garage, I guess."

"Very well. Get me a cab. I want to be taken there at once."

The starter called to one of the drivers, and a few moments later Duvall was being driven at a rapid rate toward the garage.

His inquiries, on his arrival there, developed the fact that Leary had left for his home, on Second Avenue, some little time before. Duvall secured the address, and once more set out.

He felt greatly alarmed at Grace's failure to put in an appearance. Something must have happened to her. Clearly the case was going very much

against him—the woman's second escape—the attack on Ruth Morton—now the disappearance of Grace. He felt that the time had come for action of a quick and drastic nature.

Leary lived with his wife and two children on the third floor of a Second Avenue tenement. Hastily climbing the two flights of dark steps, Duvall rapped on the door. He was overjoyed, when it was opened by a man whom he judged to be the chauffeur himself.

"Are you Martin Leary?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." The man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, choking down a bit of cold supper he had been eating, before turning in.

"I am Richard Duvall. You drove my wife uptown, somewhere, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. To Columbus Avenue and Ninety-sixth Street, sir. Won't you come in?"

"No. There isn't time. I want you to put on your coat and come along with me. Mrs. Duvall has not returned, and I am afraid something has happened to her."

The man turned and called to someone inside the flat.

"Gimme my hat and coat, Kitty," he said, then

turned again to Duvall. "I suppose I should have waited, sir, but after two hours went by, I made up my mind that Mrs. Duvall didn't need me any longer."

"What is the building at Columbus Avenue and 96th Street?" Duvall asked, as the man, pulling on the coat his wife handed him, strode down the hall.

"An apartment building, sir."

"And why did Mrs. Duvall go there?"

"Well, sir, we was following a woman, sir. She went to a hotel on Seventy-second Street, and Mrs. Duvall told me to watch for her. I did, and tracked her to the place at 96th Street. Then I telephoned to Mrs. Duvall to come, and she did."

"What time was that?"

"About half-past nine, sir."

"All right. Go on."

"Mrs. Duvall came, sir, in another taxi. I pointed out the place where the woman went in, and Mrs. Duvall went in after her. She didn't say I was to wait, but I guess she expected me to, because she had sent the other cab away. I waited over two hours, and then, when she didn't come out, I supposed she had returned to her hotel, so I came back,

too. She wasn't there, though. That's why I left the note."

"How did you think Mrs. Duvall could have gotten back to her hotel, if you were watching the door of the apartment house all the time?"

"I wasn't watching it all the time, sir. I went into the drug store once, sir, and got a cigar. And then, later on, I went to a saloon a piece down the Avenue and got a glass of beer. Mrs. Duvall didn't say I was to watch the place, sir. I thought when she got through what she had to do, she would come back to the cab. But she didn't. Do you think I ought to have waited, sir?" The man seemed greatly distressed.

"No use talking about that now," Duvall remarked, shortly. "I want to drive there at once. Get on the box, with the chauffeur, and point out the place to him."

"Yes, sir." A moment later they had started on their way uptown.

Knowing as he did Grace's impetuous nature, Duvall could only conclude that her pursuit of the woman had led her into some trap. What danger she might at this moment be facing, he could only surmise.

The apartment building, when they finally reached it, presented a grim and forbidding appearance. Not a light broke the darkness of any of its windows. The drug store on the opposite corner, too, was closed for the night. The whole locality was dark and silent.

"There's the place, sir," Leary exclaimed, as they drew up to the corner.

"Tell the driver to stop a few doors up the block —not right in front of the building."

Leary nodded. Presently the cab stopped, and he and Duvall got out.

The detective's first move was to ascertain whether or not the building had any rear exit, by which Grace might have left, without being seen by Leary. He walked down the avenue to its rear wall, only to find that it abutted against the wall of the next building. There was no rear entrance.

If, then, Grace had not left the place during the past hour, she must still be in one of the ten flats that formed the five floors of the building. But which one? That, apparently, was the problem he had to solve.

It would be useless, he felt, to inquire at the

doors of the various apartments at this hour of the morning. Admission, at least on the part of those he sought, would certainly be refused. Yet he felt that there was no time to be lost.

Stationing Leary before the front door, with instructions to keep a careful watch, Duvall went into the vestibule, and by means of his pocket light, inspected the names of the occupants of the building, as Grace had done a short time before. The hallway inside was dark, with the exception of a dim light at the foot of the stairs. Apparently the place boasted no elevator or hall-boy service.

The ten names on the boxes in the vestibule meant nothing to him. How was it possible to determine which one was that of the woman he sought? Weinberg—Scully—Martin—Stone—he ran down the list, trying to find some distinguishing mark, some clue, that would guide him.

Suddenly he paused, allowing the light from his torch to rest upon the card bearing the name of one of the tenants on the fourth floor.

This card had attracted his attention, because it was different from any of the others in the two racks. They were either engraved or printed visit-

ing cards, stuck inside the brass frames provided for them, or the names were written or printed by hand upon blank cards. But this card, bearing simply the inscription E. W. Norman, was neither engraved nor printed, nor written by hand. On the contrary, it was *typewritten.*

This in itself at once attracted Duvall's attention, owing to the fact that the various letters received by Ruth Morton had also all been typewritten. If the name, Norman, was an assumed one, as Duvall concluded it to be, what more natural than that it should be *typewritten* on a blank card, especially when a regular printed or engraved card was not available; when to have it written in long hand would have been a disclosure of identity, and when, above all, the woman in question possessed, and knew how to operate, a typewriter.

There was more than this, however, about the name on the card, to convince Duvall that E. W. Norman was the woman he sought. He recalled with distinctness the two salient features of the typewriting in all the letters sent to Miss Morton, the misplaced "a," and the broken lower right-hand corner of the capital "W." He looked closely at the two letters in the name before him.

The "a" was misplaced, the "W" minus its lower right-hand corner. The evidence seemed to be complete.

The next thing to be considered was, how could he first obtain entrance to the apartment building, and, subsequently, to the flat of the woman posing as E. W. Norman? Were he to ring the latter's bell, he felt quite sure she would not respond by unfastening the front door, but she would on the contrary be warned, and even if unable to escape, might destroy the evidence he hoped to find in her possession.

On the other hand, to ring the bell of one of the other apartments might result in the unlatching of the front door, but might involve explanations, difficult, in the circumstances, to make. There was no help for it, however. Duvall pressed the bell belonging to the family named Scully.

It was a long time before there was any response. Duvall had almost begun to despair of getting one, when he heard the clicking of the electric latch, and found that he could turn the knob and enter the hallway.

He had barely done so, when a big, burly-looking man, who might have been a bartender, or a head

waiter, appeared in the door of one of the ground floor apartments, clad only in his night clothes.

"Well—whatcha want?" he growled.

Duvall stepped up to him quickly, and spoke in a pleasant voice.

"I'm mighty sorry," he said. "I rang your bell by mistake. Pardon me."

The man glared at him, suspicion blazing from his eyes.

"That's an old one," he retorted. "How do I know you ain't a burglar?"

"Do I look like one?" Duvall asked.

The man ignored this question.

"Rang my bell by mistake, did you? Who do you want to see?"

"I have some business with a lady on the fourth floor." He went closer to the man, and lowered his voice. "I'm a detective, my friend," he whispered confidentially. "I'm here on a very important case."

The big man's eyes widened.

"Th' hell you are!" he exclaimed. "Central office?"

"No. Private."

"H—m." The man nodded slowly. "All right.

But I guess I'll keep my eye on you, just the same." He leaned against the door jamb and watched Duvall as he ascended the stairs.

The detective reached the fourth floor at top speed. He was panting, when he arrived opposite the door of the apartment he sought. Once there, he paused for a moment, listening intently. Not a sound came from the interior of the flat.

The problem of obtaining access to the place now confronted him. The door was of oak of stout construction. He doubted his ability to break it in, nor did he wish to attempt to do so, if it could be avoided. Breaking into private apartments, without a warrant, was a serious matter. There was a chance that this might not be the right place, after all. He hesitated. Yet Grace might be within, in danger, perhaps, of her life. It was imperative that he should find out the truth at once.

Stepping up to the door, he knocked sharply upon it, then waited for a reply. He scarcely expected one, but felt that he should at least give the persons within a chance.

A long silence ensued. Duvall was about to rap again, when, to his amazement, the door slowly and

noiselessly swung inward, as though impelled by some unseen hand.

The room beyond was shrouded in darkness. Duvall could see no one. Whoever had opened the door must now be concealed behind it. No one either greeted or challenged him. The door swung three-quarters open, and stood still. Not a sound was to be heard. The room was as silent as a tomb.

Duvall stood on the threshold for a few seconds, listening intently. He was greatly astonished by what had occurred. Why had the door been so silently opened? Was someone waiting within, ready to attack him the moment he made a step forward?

Whether this was the case or not, nothing, he reflected, was to be gained by remaining where he was. Drawing an automatic pistol from his pocket, he held it in readiness in his right hand, then, raising his left arm, he flung his entire weight against the partly opened door.

The door yielded to his attack. Then there came a dull thud, as though some heavy body had fallen to the floor, and immediately after the hallway resounded with a series of unearthly screams.

Duvall still moved forward. Then, to his utter surprise, there appeared in the darkness a grotesque figure, which immediately hurled itself upon him and began to clutch frantically at his throat.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT would be difficult to describe the feelings of Grace Duvall when, after having traced the mysterious woman who had attacked Ruth Morton, to the flat at Columbus Avenue and Ninety-sixth Street, she had foolishly entered the place, and allowed herself to be attacked.

The woman's onslaught had been so sudden, so unexpected, that Grace was entirely unable to offer any defense.

Her cries for help had been smothered at once and with the woman's thin but muscular fingers clutching at her throat, she found herself forced violently back upon a low couch that stood immediately behind her.

For a few moments she struggled violently, striving with both her hands to break her assailant's hold upon her, but her efforts were in vain. Slowly she realized that she was being choked into unconsciousness. The objects in the room, the woman's

set face, whirled dimly before her eyes, and then everything became blank.

When she once more recovered consciousness, she found herself still lying upon the couch. Her throat ached fearfully, and there was a dull roaring in her head.

She opened her eyes and looked about. The room was quite dark. Only a very faint glow came through the windows at its further end—the dim reflection of the lights in the street. So far as she could determine, she was alone.

She tried to move her arms, her feet, but found them bound fast. A moment later she realized that a piece of cloth of some sort, tightly rolled, had been forced into her mouth. She could not utter a sound.

There was no one in the room, but from the one which adjoined it in the rear came the murmur of voices.

By twisting her head about she was able to learn that the door connecting the two was ajar, and through the narrow opening came a thin ribbon of light.

As her senses became clearer, she realized that two persons were in the room beyond her, and from

the sounds they made, the words which from time to time came to her ears, it appeared that they were engaged in the operation of packing.

At first the words that filtered through the partly open doorway were mere fragments of conversation —words spoken here and there in a slightly higher key, and therefore distinguishable to her. She made out that her captors supposed her to be still unconscious—that they were preparing to leave the place.

"There's no hurry," she presently heard one of the women say, in a somewhat louder voice. "If she had had friends waiting outside for her, they would have come to her rescue long ago. I'm sure nobody knows where she is."

"And her husband had gone, long before I left the house. I was watching, and he first went to a saloon on the corner, and then drove off in a taxicab. So I couldn't have been followed here."

"No. But I think we ought to get away as soon as possible. When does that train go?"

"Not until half past five."

"We'll have to wait in the station, then."

"Why not here?"

"Because that woman's husband, when she fails to return to-night, is certain to look for her. She

probably came in a cab, and he might trace her that way. My advice is to leave here as soon as possible. Have you finished packing that suit case?"

"No, not quite. What do you propose to do with Jack?"

"I was going to take him with me."

"I don't see how you can do that."

"Why not?"

"Because, if any attempt is made to follow us, he would be a certain means of identification."

There was silence for a time. Grace heard the sounds of drawers being opened and shut, as the two women hurried through their task. Who was Jack, she wondered? There had been no sounds to indicate the presence of a third person in the next room.

Presently she heard the voices again.

"I think the whole affair has been a mistake, anyway," one of them said petulantly. "I don't see what you have gained by it."

"I've gotten my revenge on that baby-faced Morton girl. The stuck-up thing. I'll bet she won't act again in a hurry. What right has she to be getting a thousand a week, when they wouldn't give me a chance at any price. I may not be as good-

looking as she is, but I'm a better actress. I hate her. I believe she told the director I wouldn't do—that's why I didn't get the job. And after running down to the studio every day for three weeks, too. I hate her, I tell you. I hope she's never able to act again." The woman spoke with an intensity, a violence that made Grace shudder.

"How do you ever suppose they came to connect *me* with the matter?" the other woman said after a time. "They didn't know my address, at the studio. And even if they had, I have never been seen with you. I don't see why they ever suspected me."

"I don't know. That man Duvall is pretty shrewd, though. I *did* manage to get away from him, the other night. I'd like to have seen his face, when he got back to the cab and found me gone."

"His wife followed you here, from the hotel, I suppose. You took an awful chance."

"I don't understand how she traced me. I knew she was following me, and when she saw me go up in the elevator, at the hotel, I expected her to come, too. I was afraid they might prevent me from coming down, while they were coming up, so

I walked down. I watched, from the stairs, and saw her and the clerk get out of the elevator on the floor where that girl's apartment was. Then I came down the stairs and went out the side entrance. I knew she was upstairs, when I left, and I don't see how she traced me."

"Perhaps she had her taxi driver do it."

"That's just about it. And if he did, like as not he's waiting for her yet."

The other woman laughed.

"Nice wait he'll have," she said.

"That's all very well, but won't he see us going out?"

"Suppose he does. Anyway, it's dark, and we'll wear veils. And we won't go out together. But I don't think he'll wait so long."

"If he doesn't, he'll go back to the hotel and report, and then the woman's husband will be up here in no time. I think we'd better get out now. You'll have to leave the trunk. There's nothing much in it."

Again there was a long silence. Then Grace heard the door open, and the two women came into the room, carrying their suitcases. She closed her eyes and pretended to be still unconscious.

One of the women paused beside her.

"If they don't find out where she is," she whispered to her companion, "she's likely to stay here and starve to death."

"I shouldn't be sorry," the other snarled. "But if you feel badly about it, it's easy enough to telephone to-morrow and tell the janitor to let her out. No chance of a cab, I guess."

"No. Not at this hour. We'll take the car down to Forty-second Street, and cross over. Are you ready?"

"Yes. I'd better put out the light, though."

"All right." The first woman moved to the door, while the second returned to the bedroom and snapped off the light. A moment later Grace saw her ghostly figure pass the couch, and then the snapping of the door catch told her that she was alone.

The thought was anything but a pleasant one. If Richard did not happen to remember Leary—she knew she had mentioned him in connection with the address on the torn card he had given her—it was by no means impossible that she might lie where she was, helpless, for days. And in that event, starvation, or what was worse, thirst, might very

readily serve to fulfil the woman's predictions. She shivered at the thought of spending hours, days, in this place alone.

But was she alone? Until now, she had supposed so, in spite of the woman's remarks about "Jack," for she had heard not the slightest sound. Presently she became aware of a slow, regular scraping sound, that seemed to come from one of the rear rooms. It suggested something alive, something moving about with stealthy footsteps. Then, all of a sudden, there came a loud crash.

Grace gave an involuntary cry, or what would have been a cry, had she not been so effectually gagged. The knowledge that she lay helpless, unable to protect herself from attack, frightened her. She turned her head, straining her eyes into the semi-darkness. Something, some figure, was moving toward her from the bedroom, gliding along with swaying, noiseless steps. What it was, she could not determine; from its appearance against the darkness of the doorway it looked like a crawling figure in black.

Presently she heard the sound of breathing, and with it a mumbling noise, as though the apparition were talking to itself. Two eyes seemed to gleam

through the darkness. There was a hissing yet guttural sound, human in quality, yet horrible to her ears.

And then, without warning, the figure sprang toward her, and flung its arms about her neck.

With a gasp of fear, Grace turned and buried her face in the pillows. Fingers seemed clutching at her hair. An arm, wearing a silken sleeve, brushed her cheek, lay across her throat. A low voice muttered unintelligibly in her ear, filling her with horror. She felt her senses reeling. She thought herself about to faint.

Then, in a moment, the creature was gone, and she heard it moving noisily about the further end of the room.

From time to time there came a crash, as though in the darkness it had upset something. Then would follow long, uncanny periods of stillness, broken only by the horrible muttering. She lay with her head buried in the pillows, wondering at what instant the figure would again appear at her side.

For a long time she remained thus, straining her ears to keep track of the creature's movements. And as the moments passed, she began to take cour-

age, to hope that since no harm had as yet been offered her, the *thing* in the room, whatever it was, might not come near her again.

It appeared to have crept to the door, and from it came a low, quite human whimpering, as though it were in great grief. Perhaps, Grace thought, this was caused by the absence of the two women. She lay quite still, trying vainly to free her hands from their encircling bands, praying silently that Richard would come to her assistance. Her nerves were badly shaken. She contemplated hours, even days of such a situation with terror. At least, however, the coming of the dawn would bring one relief. She would be able to see what this uncanny thing was that shared her captivity.

Suddenly she became aware that some one was ascending the stairs in the hall outside. Could it be Richard coming to her assistance? She strained her ears, fearing that it might be only one of the tenants of the apartment above, returning home at a late hour.

The creature at the door had apparently also heard the approaching sound, for its whimperings ceased. Grace could tell by its movements that it had risen. There was a faint sound of fingers

sliding over the polished surface of the door. The steps outside came to a halt.

With all her force Grace tried to cry out, but the gag prevented her from uttering a sound. Then there came a sharp knocking at the door.

The figure before it seemed to be fumbling noiselessly with the catch. In a moment Grace felt, rather than saw, that the door had been opened. Another interval of silence came, and then the person outside flung himself heavily forward.

The silence of the room was broken by a fall, a succession of unearthly screams. Grace saw a dark body go hurtling through the air, and then came the sharp, vicious crack of a pistol. The next thing she saw was her husband, bending over her, flashing an electric torch in her face. With frightened eyes she looked up at him and tried to smile.

CHAPTER XIX

THE first thing that Duvall did, after releasing Grace from her bonds, was to take her in his arms and kiss her. Then he found the electric switch upon the wall and turned on the lights.

"What—what was it?" Grace asked, staring before her in horror.

"What was what?" he questioned.

"That—that thing that was locked in here with me."

"Poor creature. A monkey. I'm sorry I had to shoot it." He pointed to a crumpled figure on the floor dressed in a gay costume of red silk.

"But—what was a monkey doing here?"

"I'll explain all that later. Where is the woman?" He glanced toward the silent bedroom.

"They have gone?"

"They?"

"Yes. There were two."

"Ah! The Ford girl. I might have known. Where did they go?"

"I—I don't know. To the station, I think. They said something about waiting there for a train."

"What station?"

"They didn't say. But they spoke of taking a car to 42nd Street, and crossing over. It must have been the Grand Central."

"Or possibly the West Shore. We'll have to try both. Are you able to leave now?"

Grace straightened out her stiffened limbs.

"Yes—I—guess so."

"Then come along."

As they started to leave the place, two men confronted them at the door. One was Mr. Scully, he of the ground-floor apartment, the other a short, thickset man, who at once announced himself as the janitor of the building.

"What's going on up here?" he questioned. "I heard a shot."

Duvall pointed to the crumpled heap on the floor.

"I had to shoot it, though I'm sorry now that I did. It attacked me in the dark. I couldn't afford

to take any chances. My wife was locked in here, and was, so far as I knew, in grave danger."

"Your wife?" The man glanced at Grace.

"Yes."

"But—where is Miss Norman? And how did that monkey get in here?"

"Miss Norman left here some time ago. Another woman, by the name of Ford, was with her. She brought the monkey."

"What for?"

"I imagine she didn't want to leave it at her rooms. She did not expect to return there."

"And Miss Norman's gone, you say?"

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"I don't just know, but I mean to find out at once. She has been guilty of a grave offense, on account of which I have been trying to lay my hands on her for several days. My wife tells me she took most of her belongings with her in her flight."

"Flight, eh?" the man growled. "And she owes us a month's rent. I hope you find her."

"I think I shall. Meanwhile, suppose you wait here in the apartment, in case, for any reason, she comes back. If I find her I shall bring her here

at once, and unless the place is open I couldn't very well get in."

"All right." The man glanced about the disordered room. "That damned monkey has smashed a lamp and a lot of ornaments that somebody's got to pay for. Miss Norman rented this place furnished."

Duvall made no reply, but nodding to Grace, led the way to the hall.

"I'll be back soon, whether I find the woman or not," he said. "I've got some investigations to make here."

Accompanied by Grace, he descended to the cab. Leary seemed overjoyed to realize that Grace was safe, and began a long apology for his carelessness in not waiting for her earlier in the evening, but Duvall cut him short.

"Good thing you didn't," he said. "By coming back to the hotel and leaving the note for Mrs. Duvall, you made it possible for me to find her, and if I hadn't"—he paused and looked at Grace with a troubled face—"there's no knowing what might have happened. Tell the chauffeur to drive to the Grand Central Station."

It was three o'clock when the cab drew up at the

curb. In spite of the lateness of the hour, there were a good many persons moving in and out of the station. Duvall got out and motioned to Grace and Leary to do the same.

"We will all go in by different doors," he explained, "and meet in the general waiting-room. If the women are not there, Mrs. Duvall will look through the women's room. If you see them, and they make no effort to escape, wait for me to join you. If they do try to get away, detain them until I come."

It was Duvall himself, however, who first caught sight of the objects of their pursuit. They sat, both apparently asleep, on a bench in one corner of the main waiting room. The detective was not certain of their identity, heavily veiled as they were, until he had gone quite close up to them. Then he saw that they were Miss Ford and the woman who had escaped from him while in the cab the night before.

He leaned over and tapped the Ford girl on the shoulder.

"Wake up, Miss Ford," he exclaimed.

The girl shivered, then struggled to her feet. Her companion appeared to be too dazed to move,

although she opened her eyes and stared at him with a vague and terrified face.

"Will you come with me quietly," he said, "or shall I call a policeman and have you put under arrest for the attack upon my wife?" He addressed himself more particularly to the woman who was sitting.

She now rose and made a movement as though to attempt to escape. Duvall grasped her by the arm.

"It will be quite useless to attempt it, Miss Norman," he said. "I have help close at hand in case it is needed." He glanced toward Grace and Leary, who were now approaching. "I do not wish to use any violence, of course, but you and your friend are going back to the apartment on Ninety-sixth Street with me."

His voice, his manner, made it apparent to the two women that escape was hopeless. They seemed suddenly to realize it, to give up further ideas of resistance.

"Very well," Miss Norman said, "we will go."

"Good." Duvall turned to Leary. "Take those two suit cases, Leary, and get another cab." In silence the little party made its way to the street.

The two women said nothing on the way back to the apartment, and Duvall did not question them. There was time enough for that, he reflected, after they reached their destination. Within less than an hour from the time of their departure, their entire party was back in the woman's apartment.

The janitor was still there on guard, but the body of the dead monkey had been removed. Duvall, requesting Leary to remain, closed the door. The janitor rose and came toward them.

"Look here, Miss Norman," he began, "who's going to pay for that broken lamp and them vases and ornaments?"

The woman regarded him with a stare, but said nothing.

"Never mind about those things now," Duvall said. "They can remain. I have some questions of much greater importance to ask these ladies. You need not wait. In fact, I should prefer that you did not. The matter is a private one." The janitor took his departure, grumbling to himself, and Duvall closed and bolted the door. Then he requested the two women to be seated. They obeyed without a word.

"Why did you send those threatening messages

to Miss Morton?" he suddenly asked, addressing himself to Miss Norman.

She faced him defiantly.

"I'll answer no questions," she flung at him. "You can't prove I sent anybody any messages."

"Do you deny it, then?"

"Yes!"

Duvall turned to Grace.

"You saw this woman enter Miss Morton's hotel to-night and go up in the elevator, did you not?"

"Certainly!"

"Do you deny that?" The detective once more addressed Miss Norman.

"No. What of it? How do you know I went to Miss Morton's room?" Her defiance was in no way lessened. Duvall saw that she meant to deny her guilt utterly. He turned to Leary.

"This woman came to you, did she not, with a request that you spy on my wife's movements, and inform her concerning them?"

The chauffeur nodded.

"Yes, sir. She did."

Again Miss Norman spoke.

"Suppose I did. What then?"

"You will admit, I presume, that you fainted at

the theatre the other night when the picture of the death's-head seal was thrown on the screen, and that later you escaped from the cab in which I had placed you?"

"Certainly I will admit it. The hideous thing startled me. As for escaping from the cab, I had every reason to do so. You had not only attempted to drug me, but after that you tried to steal the contents of my purse. You are the one who ought to be arrested, not I."

The woman's attitude began to annoy Duvall, especially as, so far, he realized fully that the evidence against her was entirely circumstantial and vague. He turned away, and began to search the rooms.

The search, although he conducted it with the utmost minuteness, was quite unproductive of results. If the woman possessed a typewriter, she had apparently made away with it. The scrap basket contained nothing but a few torn bits of paper of no value. There was no stationery on the small desk in the living room, no black sealing wax, such as had been used to make the seals. Duvall began to realize that the case against his prisoner was far from complete. Returning from a fruit-

less search of the bedroom, Duvall's eye fell upon the two suitcases that the women had carried in their flight. He bent over to them at once, and proceeded to open them, one after the other.

"Search them, please." He nodded to Grace.

The latter did so with the utmost care, but found nothing of an incriminating nature. The two women sat in stony silence, showing little interest in the proceedings. Duvall went over to them.

"Show me your rings," he said to Miss Norman.

The woman held out her hand.

"Take them off."

She stripped from her finger three rings. One was a gold seal with a monogram upon it, another a cheap affair set with pearls, the third a twisted gold band. None of the rings contained the mysterious death's-head seal, or could in any way have concealed it.

An examination of Miss Ford's stock of jewelry produced no better results.

"Let me see the contents of your purse," Duvall said, indicating a leather bag the Norman woman carried on her wrist.

She handed the bag over with an almost imperceptible smile. Duvall examined it but without

result. The seal was not inside. Nor did Miss Ford's purse, a silver one, contain anything worthy of his notice. He handed the two back.

"Anything else you would like to see?" Miss Norman asked with cutting irony.

Duvall walked over to the window and looked out. It was still quite dark. The woman's assurance puzzled him. It was quite clear now that unless he could find the typewriter, the letter paper, the missing seal, and could connect this woman with them, there remained but a single way in which she could be connected with the attacks upon Miss Morton, and that would be by the direct testimony of the motion-picture actress herself, concerning the woman's visit to her room. But suppose the visit had been made in disguise. It would have been simple enough to have put on a mask on entering the room and subsequently have thrown it away. And Miss Morton, frightened as she had been, might be totally unable to identify her assailant. She had covered her tracks well. Was she then to go free?

The matter of the typewriter Duvall put aside for the moment. The woman might readily have a friend who possessed one—a hotel stenographer,

perhaps, who had permitted her to make use of her machine. But the seal was a matter of more importance. His examination of the several impressions had shown him that it was extremely well carved—a decidedly expensive piece of work. Of course, the woman might have thrown it away during her flight, but it seemed unlikely. What had she done with it? The question was one to which he felt he must find an answer.

Again, with Grace's assistance, he examined the articles in the women's suitcases, testing the backs of hairbrushes, the contents of powder boxes, the interior of a cake of soap, a bottle of shoe blackening, but the search was as unproductive of results as before. Duvall was forced, against his will, to the conclusion that the woman had made away with the seal, rather than run the risk of its being found upon her person.

"'Is there anything more you want of us?" Miss Norman asked, when he had again closed the suitcases. "If not, my friend and I would like to go." She rose as though to take her departure.

"Yes. There is one thing more. You will have to go to Mrs. Morton's hotel with me, so that her daughter may have an opportunity to identify you.

But it is far too early to start now. I will send out presently and have some breakfast brought in."

It was beginning to grow light now. Duvall suggested to Grace that she had better go out into the little kitchenette at the rear of the apartment and see if she couldn't find the materials for preparing some coffee. He himself sat down at the little writing desk, and proceeded once more to examine its varnished surface with the greatest care. He had thought, if the letters had been sealed here, there would in all probability be some tiny spots of the black sealing wax upon the desk top, but he could discover nothing. Presently he heard Grace calling to him from the kitchen.

Directing Leary to keep an eye on the two women, he joined her at once.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you discovered anything?"

"No, not exactly. But—what does that mean?" She pointed to a candle which stood in a tin holder on the table. "Do you notice the spots of black wax on the candlestick?"

Duvall took the candlestick up and looked at it. There were large splashes of sealing wax all over the bottom of the tin tray, not minute spots, such

as might have been made by the dropping of bits of the hot wax in making a seal, but circular splotches half an inch or more in diameter, as though a great quantity of the material had been melted.

"What do you make of it?" Duvall asked.

"I don't know. Looks as though she had melted up the whole stick, for some reason or other. Possibly to destroy it."

"Hardly that. It would have been far easier to have simply thrown it out of the window. And besides, the mere possession of a stick of sealing wax, black or otherwise, could not be regarded as evidence. This woman is smart, very smart and shrewd. She did not melt that wax up for nothing. I think I have an idea of her purpose, although I cannot, of course, be sure, yet. Did you find some coffee?"

"Yes. I'll have it ready very soon. What do you make of this woman's attitude?"

"It is simple enough. She believes that she can bluff this thing out without it being possible to prove her the author of the letters. And she may be right. Certainly, unless Miss Morton can identify her, or we can discover the death's-head seal

in her possession, she stands a very good chance of getting away scot free."

The coffee which Grace presently brought in was drunk by the whole party in silence. Duvall seemed unusually preoccupied. His eyes scarcely left Miss Norman; he appeared to be studying her, watching her every movement with extraordinary interest, although he strove, by assuming a careless indifference, to disguise his scrutiny. Grace, who knew his methods, realized that the sealing wax in the candlestick had suggested some clue to him, which he was trying his best to work out.

At about seven o'clock Leary was sent out to fetch some breakfast. By half past eight they were ready to go to see Mrs. Morton.

Before doing so, Duvall thought it wise to call the latter up and make arrangements about their coming. He presently got Mrs. Morton on the wire.

"Good morning, Mrs. Morton. How is your daughter?" he asked.

"Much better," the reply came. "Very much better. I am going to take her back to the apartment at once."

"The apartment?"

"Yes. She will be more comfortable there, and safer, too, I think. We came here on your advice so that we might escape this fearful persecution. But since the persons who have been threatening my daughter have discovered our whereabouts, I see no reason for remaining any longer. Do you?"

"No. I was going to suggest that you should return. I think I can quite safely assure you that there will be no recurrence of the threats."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I think the woman who has been making them is now in my hands. I will bring her to the apartment a little later in the morning so that your daughter may identify her. Will eleven o'clock suit you?"

"Yes, very well."

"Then I will come at that hour. Good-by." He hung up the receiver and turned to speak to Grace. His eyes, however, sought the figure of Miss Norman. She had not anticipated his quick scrutiny, and had for the moment ceased to be on her guard. Duvall smiled to himself. The theory which the spots of sealing wax had suggested had in that moment received an unexpected confirmation.

CHAPTER XX

RUTH MORTON had received a fearful shock the evening before, but by the morning she had recovered from the immediate effects of it, although she still felt extremely weak.

When Duvall and his little party arrived at the apartment on Fifty-seventh Street, they were received in the library by Mrs. Morton.

She greeted both Grace and Duvall cordially, but it was evident, from her manner, that she found the presence of the Norman woman and Miss Ford highly distasteful to her.

Duvall drew her to one side, leaving the two women in charge of Leary and Grace.

"How is your daughter now, Mrs. Morton?" he asked.

"Better, I think."

"May I see her for a few moments?"

"Yes. She is expecting you. Come this way, please. She is occupying my room at present. She

still has a fear of the other one—the one she formerly used."

"I see. But she need not have it now. There will be no further trouble." He followed Mrs. Morton into her bedroom.

Ruth, looking very haggard and white, was sitting in an easy chair by the window. Duvall was amazed to note how terribly the shock of the night before had affected her.

"How do you do, Miss Morton," he said, offering his hand. "I am glad to find you almost yourself again.

The girl looked up with a faint smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Duvall. I am much better. I understand that you have found out who has been causing me all this trouble."

"I think I have. But before I go ahead I want you to give me a little assistance. Do you think you would know the woman who came to your rooms last night, in case you should see her again?"

Miss Morton shuddered.

"I—I don't know. I do not think I saw her face. It was all so very sudden——"

"Tell me about it," Duvall said. "It may help

me to get at the facts. That is, if you feel able to do so."

"I think I do. What shall I tell you?"

"Just describe, in a few words, what happened."

"Well, as you know, I had been feeling rather better yesterday, and had begun to rather laugh at my fears. Mother was with me constantly, and Nora as well, and I began to feel quite cheerful again, especially as I knew that you were making splendid progress and had found the woman who had been writing me. Mother told me that you expected to arrest her before the day was over. She said your wife had been helping you, too.

"After dinner Nora, who had been in the hotel all day, asked permission to go out for awhile and mother told her she might go. The poor girl had been almost a prisoner since we arrived at the hotel. That was about eight o'clock.

"About half past eight a boy came to the room with a card, upon which was written your wife's name, and a note asking if she might see mother for a few moments. We both looked at the card and then mother decided to go down and see her. She instructed me to lock the door while she was out, and of course I did so.

"In a few minutes mother came back. She seemed greatly excited, said that she had seen Mrs. Duvall and that you had sent a message to the effect that you had arrested the woman who had been threatening me and wanted mother to come to your hotel at once to appear against her in court. It was necessary, the woman who pretended to be your wife said, that mother should come at once, as otherwise the woman couldn't be held.

"We talked the matter over for a few moments and I told her that I thought she ought to go. She seemed rather afraid to leave me alone, but I promised to keep the door locked, and anyway, as I pointed out to her, if the woman was arrested I had nothing further to fear.

"At last mother decided she would go, and left me. I locked the door as soon as she went out.

"It seemed to me a very few moments before I heard some one rapping. At first I supposed that mother had come back for some reason or other. Then I thought it might be Nora who had said she was only going out for a breath of air. So, suspecting nothing, I unlocked the door and opened it.

"A woman came in, very quickly, before I real-

ized it. She was not tall, and rather slight, and I think she had light hair. I couldn't see her face well because she had twisted a black veil across it, hiding her eyes and the upper part of her features. She turned as soon as she got in the room and locked the door.

"I was too surprised for a moment to speak, then I asked her what she wanted.

"'I want you,' she said in a terrible voice, and I saw that she was taking a bottle from her handbag.

"I was so frightened that I could not cry out, although I tried. You see, the warnings I had received had gotten me so worked up that my nerves were all on edge, and as soon as I saw the bottle, I concluded that the woman was about to throw vitriol in my face. So I put my hands to my eyes and ran into the bedroom.

"The woman came behind me, saying that my looks would soon be gone, that my days as an actress were over, and other things like that which I scarcely heard I was so frightened. When she got to me she caught hold of my arm and pulled me around, facing her.

"I couldn't keep my eyes closed now, for I simply

had to see what she was doing. It seemed worse not looking at her, and then I thought I might take the bottle away from her and save myself in that way. So I took my hands from my face and rushed toward her.

"Then she raised the bottle and dashed something into my face.

"It seemed hot, stinging, and made my eyes burn frightfully. I was sure it was vitriol, and the thought was too much for me I guess, for I felt myself falling and—well, that's all I remember until I woke up and found the doctor and mother there. It was a terrible experience. I could scarcely believe them, when they told me, after I came to, that I wasn't really hurt at all."

Duvall looked at the girl's face. It showed no signs of injury, although her eyes were red and inflamed.

"Then it wasn't vitriol after all?" he asked, wondering.

"No, it apparently wasn't. The doctor said he thought it must have been ammonia."

"Remarkable!" Duvall muttered to himself. "Why should she have gone to all that trouble, just to frighten you?"

"That's apparently all she intended to do from the start. Do you know, Mr. Duvall, I've been thinking this thing over, and I believe her whole plan from the beginning was merely to ruin me in my work by *fear*. And I must say that she very nearly succeeded."

"Very nearly," said Duvall, with a frown. "If this thing had kept up for another week or two, you would have been a complete nervous wreck."

"I am now, I'm afraid," Miss Morton said, sadly. "I don't feel as though I could act again for a long time."

"Oh, yes, you will. You have youth, and that is everything. And now, tell me, do you think if you took a look at this woman you might recognize her?"

The girl shuddered.

"Is she—here?" she asked.

"Yes. In the library."

"You think it would be quite safe?"

"Quite. She can do you no harm while I am here."

"Very well. I will see her if you wish it, but I am very much afraid that I shall not be able to identify her."

Duvall held out his hand.

"Come," he said. "I will take you in."

Miss Morton rose, and walking slowly and with considerable effort, went with him into the front room. Standing in the doorway, with the detective beside her, she confronted the two women. They regarded her with stony indifference.

"Miss Morton," Duvall said, "do you recognize either of these two women as the one who attacked you in your rooms last night?"

The girl gazed helplessly from Miss Ford to her companion and back again. Then she slowly shook her head.

"No," she said. "It might have been either of them. They look somewhat alike. But as for saying which one it was, if it *was* either of them, I'm afraid I can't. The woman was veiled. The room was not brightly lighted. And I was very much frightened."

The look of disappointment in Duvall's face was reflected in that of both Grace and Mrs. Morton. The two women, on the contrary, seemed vastly relieved. Miss Norman's mouth curled in rather an ironical smile.

"Are you through with this inquisition now?" she

asked. "For if you are, my friend and myself would like to continue our journey. You have had no right to bring us here in the first place, and I am strongly considering making a complaint against you for having done so." She grasped firmly the umbrella she had held in her hand all the morning, and turned as though to go. Leary, however, stood before the door.

"You apparently have forgotten," Duvall remarked, going toward her, "that I still have a charge against you for attacking my wife."

"Very well; make it. I can prove that your wife forcibly entered my apartment under false pretense, saying that she was collecting money for the war sufferers in Poland. If I attacked her, it was in self-defense."

"That isn't true," cried Grace. "You sprang at me——"

"My word is as good as yours," Miss Norman interrupted. "And my friend here will bear out what I say." She nodded to Miss Ford. "You also," she again faced Duvall, "broke into my apartment without warrant and killed my pet monkey. You will have to answer for that as well. You have accused me of sending threat-

ening letters to this girl here. I defy you to prove it."

Duvall, who had been coming nearer the woman all the time, reached out and snatched from her hands the umbrella she held. The others in the room regarded him with astonishment. The woman herself gave a cry of anger, and starting forward tried to recover her lost property.

Duvall yielded it to her at once, but not before he had torn from the handle two small round balls covered with knitted silk that hung from it by a heavy silken cord.

Miss Norman, seeing what he had done, drew back with a cry of anger. A few incoherent words trailed from her lips. Duvall, paying no attention to her, ripped open one of the silk-meshed coverings and extracted from it a small, round black object about the size of a hickory nut.

He gazed at it for a moment, then going quickly to the table in the center of the room brought the thing down smartly upon its surface.

There was a crackling sound, and bits of some black substance flew in every direction. A moment later the detective raised in his hand a glittering

bit of metal and held it up so that the others might see it.

"The death's-head seal," he said, quietly.

Miss Norman fell on her knees before Ruth Morton, her hands upraised.

"Forgive me—forgive me!" she sobbed.

CHAPTER XXI

"IN reconstructing the case from the beginning," Duvall said, later in the day, "one fact stands out with especial prominence—the almost total absence of any definite clues."

He was sitting in the library of the Morton apartment, and with him were his wife, Mrs. Morton and Ruth.

"The thing was certainly very cleverly done," Mrs. Morton remarked. "I still do not understand it in the least. How, for instance, were the letters placed in my daughter's room?"

"I am coming to that," replied Duvall. "But first I will run over the case in the light of Miss Norman's confession to me so that you may understand it thoroughly and decide what action you wish to take against her and her sister, Miss Ford."

"Her sister?"

"Yes. The woman's name is not Norman. It is Ford—Jane Ford. Norman is an assumed name.

"The two of them came to New York about a year ago from somewhere up the state—a small town near Rochester, I believe. One secured employment in the motion picture studio—the other, the one calling herself Miss Norman, worked as a stenographer.

"Her interest in motion pictures having been aroused by her sister's stories of the life in the studio, she became an ardent picture 'fan,' and spent every evening watching the films.

"Her attention was particularly devoted to the pictures in which your daughter appeared, owing to the stories her sister told her about Miss Morton's marvelous salary, her beauty, the ease with which she had become famous.

"These stories naturally inflamed her sister's mind. Working for ten dollars a week, she began to compare her state with that of a girl of her own age earning a hundred times as much, and gradually the idea began to possess her that she could become a motion-picture star herself.

"At first she admired Miss Morton immensely and never missed an opportunity to see the pictures in which she appeared. Then, convinced of her own ability as an actress, she made application at

the studio at which her sister worked for a position.

It seems she haunted the studio for several weeks without getting any encouragement. Then, more to get rid of her than for any other reason, one of the directors offered her a place as extra woman in a picture Miss Morton was doing—a very minor part, in which she had to appear momentarily as a saleswoman at a counter in a department store.

"Unfortunately, when Miss Morton saw her she happened to say to the director that she would have preferred a woman of a different type, dark, taller, so as to provide a more effective foil to her own type of beauty. As a result, the girl did not get the position."

"I am so sorry," Ruth cried. "I hadn't the least idea who the girl was, and, of course, I wouldn't have done her any harm for the world."

"I know that," Duvall replied, "but *she* did not. She is mentally rather erratic, and she at once conceived the idea that you had singled her out for persecution; that, in fact, you were envious of her abilities and meant to prevent her from getting a chance.

"The thing preyed on her mind, and I fancy,

unbalanced it a little. She conceived a violent hatred for you, and with her sister began to plot revenge.

"Her first move was to persuade her sister to move to the house on Fifty-seventh Street, close to your apartment. It took them some time to find the place—to secure a room situated as Miss Ford's was, but at last they managed it. Then they went to work.

"The letters were all typewritten on a machine belonging to a public stenographer whom the girls knew. Jane Ford would stop in at this woman's place late in the afternoon and asking permission to use one of the machines would type the threatening letters. The paper she used was procured especially for her by her sister at a stationery store downtown.

"The seal, a curious thing, had belonged to the girls' father, and she conceived the idea of signing the letters with it to add to the grimness of her threats. As a matter of fact, I do not think she ever had the least intention of carrying them out. It was to be solely a campaign of fear. She probably thought that she could so frighten you, Miss Morton, that your health would be broken down,

and your work consequently interfered with to such an extent that you would lose your position. As I say, I think she is mentally somewhat unbalanced. I cannot account for some of her actions, otherwise.

"The mailing of the first letter, the telephone messages, were comparatively simple. It was the delivery of those at the apartment that taxed her ingenuity. Yet the method was simple enough.

"The girls' father, I am told, had been an animal trainer in a circus, and one of his bequests to his daughters was a pet monkey named Jack, that had been taught to do all sorts of tricks. The girls brought this monkey to New York with them after their father's death. When the question arose of delivering the letters in your room, Miss Morton, she decided to make use of the animal.

"Creeping out of Marcia Ford's bedroom to the roof of the back building, and taking the monkey with her, she crossed the roof of the second house and reached the wall of the apartment. From here she was in a position to reach either of your bedroom windows in the following manner.

"The monkey was led by means of a long, thin rope, attached to a sort of harness about his neck

and shoulders. By going to the rear edge of the back building they could readily swing him over to the fire-escape, while by ascending to the top of the attic roof overlooking the court, they could in the same way enable him to reach the other window. The monkey had been trained to carry objects in his mouth. This accounts for the row of indentations on the letters found in your room. I had supposed they came from some mechanical device, fastened to the end of a long pole, but as a matter of fact, they were made by the monkey's teeth.

"The animal being light in weight, and the pads of his feet being, of course, soft, no traces of his presence were left on the newly painted surface of the fire-escape. The handkerchief that I found there had been knotted about his neck as the collar to which the rope was fastened had seemed a bit weak. In some way it became detached, probably when the girls jerked on the cord to summon him back after he had completed his task.

"In crossing the roofs of the two houses, the monkey's paws, as well as the rope, became covered with dust. This explains the spots which seemed to be finger marks upon the counterpane of your bed, and the long, dark straight line across the bed,

which I thought might have been left by a rod or pole. As a matter of fact, it was made by a tightly stretched rope.

"The sending of the monkey on the night when you were lying in bed must have been a mistake. You will remember that, contrary to your usual habit, you retired that night very early—a little after eight o'clock, if I remember correctly. The girls, coming over the room, saw that your room was dark, and naturally supposed that no one was in it. The grinning face of the monkey standing on the bed beside you, was the death's head apparition you thought you saw. At your cries the two women at once jerked on the cord, and the monkey hastened back to them through the partly raised window, leaving no trace of his presence except the black smudges of which I have spoken.

"I have no doubt that Jane Ford followed me back to my hotel after one of my early visits to your apartment, and thus learned by name and address. Her supposition that I was engaged in an attempt to ferret out the writer of the letters was a shrewd guess.

"The photograph was stolen from the studio by Marcia Ford who, being an employee, had ample

opportunity to stroll about the place after office hours without exciting suspicion. She also arranged the subsequent delivery of the photograph and the substitution of the fake telegram.

"Even when I made my night visit to Marcia Ford's room, and was attacked in the dark by the monkey, I did not suspect what it was. The room was pitch dark, and in the gloom I got the impression of a much larger object—a person, in fact, and this impression was heightened by the fact that the animal wore a silken jacket, and I felt the sleeve of it against my throat. I only regret that the noise, the cries he made, singularly human in quality, made it necessary for me to leave the place so precipitately.

"The Ford girl and her sister had evidently just come in, and rushing to the room found evidences of some one having been there. The monkey had been shut in a closet, and by opening the door I had, of course, released it. Fearing discovery, they arranged to flee at once. Jane Ford went uptown. Her sister remained to pack up her belongings.

"The visit to your hotel, the attack on you, was a crazy inspiration of the moment. Not knowing that my wife was following her, and having seen me on the sidewalk on Fifty-seventh Street as she

drove away, Miss Norman naturally felt that if she could get you, Mrs. Morton, out of the way, she would be perfectly safe in going up to your rooms.

"Even when alone with your daughter, she did not attempt to do her any serious bodily injury, but contented herself with hurling the ammonia in her face, counting, no doubt, upon the effect of the shock that would result. As I have said, the woman is mentally a little unbalanced. The things she does are not normal."

"Nevertheless, they came very near being fatal," Mrs. Morton remarked grimly. "The doctor informed me that the fright, the shock of her experience, might readily have caused Ruth's death, or upset her reason."

"I do not doubt it," replied Duvall. "The woman has all the cunning of an insane person. She showed it when, overcome by the sight of the death's-head seal I had flashed upon the screen at the theater, she so quickly recovered herself that she was able to deceive me completely regarding her condition, and subsequently to make her escape.

"Both she and her sister realized that it had become necessary for them to leave the city. Marcia Ford, taking the monkey with her in a cab, hastened

uptown to join her sister at the latter's apartment. She knew that I was not following her, for she had seen me drive off to join you, Mrs. Morton, at my hotel. They both thought themselves quite safe, and able to leave the city without interference.

"The arrival of my wife at their apartment caused them to hasten their plans. They realized that we were close upon their heels. Jane Ford knew that the ring containing the death's-head seal was about the only evidence that existed against her, yet she hesitated to throw it away, as it had belonged to her father, and she prized it highly. With the cunning that she had exhibited throughout, she conceived the idea of hiding it in one of the tassels upon the handle of her umbrella.

"These tassels, as you perhaps know, are usually made of round bits of wood, enclosed in a covering of knitted silk. The girl removed one of the wooden balls, and having embedded the ring in a ball of black sealing wax, put it in place of the wooden one. It was a most ingenious hiding place, and one extremely unlikely to be discovered."

"How did you happen to discover it, Mr. Duvall?" Mrs. Morton asked.

"In this way. When my wife called my attention

to the spots of black wax on the tray of the candlestick, I saw at once that a far larger amount of the wax had been melted than would have been required in making an ordinary seal. The impressions on the warnings the woman sent were very small and flat, so as to readily be inserted in the envelopes containing the letters without being bulky, or becoming broken while passing through the mails. But here were spots of the wax that had dripped down as large as a silver quarter and larger. What, I wondered, had caused the woman to melt so large a quantity of wax?

"I attempted to put myself in her place and to think what she would do to hide the seal ring. The idea of embedding it in a ball of the wax occurred to me. But, having done this, what would she do with the ball? It was not an easy thing to hide; in her purse, her satchel, it would have attracted attention at once. Then I noticed the round black ornaments hanging from her umbrella, with their silken cords and tassels. What better place to hide the ball of wax.

"In order to test my theory, I twice attempted to take the umbrella from her on our way here, as though to relieve her of the trouble of carrying it.

In both instances she drew back at once, and refused to allow the umbrella to leave her possession. This action on her part convinced me that my guess had been a correct one. The subsequent finding of the ring broke down her assurance. As you know, she has made a complete confession."

"Poor woman," Ruth Morton remarked. "What are you going to do with her?"

"That rests with you, Miss Morton. If you decide to prosecute you can readily do so. The penalty for sending threatening letters through the mails is not a light one. And her attack upon you, under the circumstances, is a very serious matter indeed."

Ruth turned to her mother.

"I think we ought to let them go," she said.

"And have the same trouble over again," Mrs. Morton replied. "I could never feel safe with that woman at large."

"I do not think she will trouble you again, Mrs. Morton," remarked Duvall. "She is thoroughly frightened. All her assurance has disappeared. She begs that she and her sister be allowed to return home at once. It seems that some relative in Rochester has offered them a home there, and

they were going to join her when we intercepted them."

"Then let them go," Ruth Morton exclaimed. "I certainly do not wish to cause them any harm, especially as you tell me the woman who originated the whole thing is mentally not quite right."

"She is certainly unbalanced, so far as her grievance against you is concerned. But I feel sure that were you to explain matters to her, and let her understand that your action in losing her the position at the studio was quite impersonal on your part, she will realize the folly of what she has done, and come to her senses."

"I will do it," said Ruth. "I don't want to injure her any more. Let them go home in peace."

"Very well." Duvall rose to go. Permit me to say, Mrs. Morton, that I admire your daughter's generosity very much. Good morning." He and Grace bade their hosts good-by and took their leave.

"She's a lovely girl," Grace remarked, as they drove to their hotel. "I like her immensely."

"Then you aren't jealous of me any more, because I so suddenly became a motion-picture 'fan'?"

"Richard!" she laughed. "Don't be silly. I

suppose I shall always be jealous of you when a girl, as beautiful as Ruth Morton, is concerned. After all, to be jealous is only a woman's way of paying tribute to another woman's charms."

Duvall laughed.

"It was Miss Ford's way, too," he said, "but as a means of showing one's appreciation it had its faults."

THE END.

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